

IN THE ROCKIES WITH KIT CARSON



THE BUCKSKIN BOOKS
By JOHN T. MCINTYRE



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“IT’S AN INDIAN,” SPOKE THE TRAPPER

IN THE ROCKIES WITH KIT CARSON

By
JOHN T. McINTYRE

Illustrations by
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In the Rockies With Kit Carson

In the Rockies With Kit Carson

CHAPTER I

THE TRAPPER OF TAOS AND SANTA FÉ

LATE one afternoon when the sunlight was slanting through the trees and wavering upon the adobe walls of the Pueblo of Los Angeles, when the only sounds were the whispering winds in the higher boughs, and the thrumming of a stringed instrument from the soldiers' quarters, a tall Spanish mule came clattering into the village with two boys astride its back. They were bronzed, sinewy looking youngsters; each held a long barreled rifle.

A barefooted sentry, his piece over his shoulder, looked up at the sudden sound;

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and as the mule was abruptly checked beside him, and the two lads slipped from its back, he whipped his weapon about and with a brown thumb upon the trigger, cried :

“ Halt ! ”

The elder of the two lads wiped his forehead with his sleeve ; then to the other he said :

“ Hold tight to that old chap, Joe ; we may have further use for him, you know.”

“ I hope not,” declared Joe, ruefully. “ He’s got a back like a buck-saw, and a gait like a dromedary. And between the two he’s the worst thing I ever rode.”

The elder boy saluted the sentinel.

“ We are strangers,” he said, in good Spanish. “ We belong to the trading schooner ‘ Gadfly ’ now off the coast ; and we are in pursuit of a man named Lopez who ran away.”

The sentry grinned.

“ A deserter ? ”

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"He is. But we don't object to that so much as we do the fact that he's a thief as well. He robbed us, swam ashore, and the last seen of him he was heading toward this village."

The sentry placed the butt of his musket upon a stone and leaned socially upon the barrel.

"There are some strangers in the Pueblo now," he said. "But they are Americans. And they are not sailors, but trappers. They came from Taos in New Mexico," wonderingly; "they crossed the desert where they might have died of thirst. And all to trap beaver."

"Lopez is a half-breed," said the youth. "And he has a scar, made by the slash of a knife, across his left cheek."

The sentry shook his head.

"I saw no such man," said he. "It may be that he went with the Hudson Bay men who I hear were at work on the streams not far from here about a week ago."

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"The man we are after left the schooner only this morning," said the boy.

"The señor captain may have seen him," spoke the soldier, helpfully. "It is his duty to ask all strangers for their passports."

"Where is the señor captain to be found?" asked the boy.

The soldier shook his head, shouldered his piece and prepared to resume his tramp up and down.

"At this hour," said he, "the captain is always asleep. It is his habit. Later, you can see him."

Joe Frazier, from his post at the tall mule's head, laughed.

"The habit is a bad one," said he in reply to an inquiring look from his friend. "And I think the quicker the señor captain is broken of it the better. So I think, Dave, it's your plain duty to do it."

Dave Johnson turned soberly to the sentry. In careful Spanish he said :

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"I am grieved to hear that your officer is asleep. Also I am sorry that under the circumstances we shall be forced to awaken him. Give him our compliments and say that two Americanos are here in a matter of much haste."

The sentry stared.

"Wake the señor captain! Never! He would beat me!"

Dave considered, still gravely.

"That would be awkward," he decided. "And I wouldn't care to see it done. So to save you trouble, I will awaken him myself."

And before the astonished soldier could prevent him, he strode to the door of the adobe dwelling and began thundering upon the door. A sleepy muttering was the answer.

"Take care!" cried the dismayed sentry, apparently at a loss as to how to deal with the situation. "He has an evil temper, señor!"

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As the knocking went on, the muttering within swelled into a roar; then the door was flung open and a squat, heavy-faced man with small, angry eyes, and a brass-hilted sword in his hand, appeared. He glared at Dave, the little eyes seeming to snap.

"And so," said he, "you will come knocking, will you, my brave fellow! Nothing will do but I must be disturbed, eh? Not a wink must I get after all the labors of the day. Very well, señor; we shall see."

He spoke quietly, but there was a menace in his tone which did not escape Joe Frazier.

"Careful there, Dave," he called in English. "I think he's up to something."

The little eyes of the Mexican officer now went to the sentry.

"And my commands are worth nothing, are they, my man? I waste my breath telling you that I must not be disturbed, and you allow the first rascally Americano

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who comes along to come thundering at my door. Very well! It will be your turn later!"

Again his glance shifted to Dave. The young American saluted in stiff military fashion.

"Pardon me, señor," he said. "It is my misfortune that I had to break in upon your slumbers. The fact is ——"

But the man stopped him sharply.

"Enough!" said he. "Who are you?"

"We belong to the schooner 'Gadfly.'"

"What are you doing here?"

Dave related in a few words the same story he had told the sentry. The officer listened, all the time prodding the sun-baked earth before the door with the point of his sword; there was a scowl upon his heavy face, and the small angry eyes looked red and threatening.

"A pretty story," said he. "Your passports!"

"They are on board the schooner. In

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our hurry to pursue Lopez we forgot them."

The captain showed his teeth in what was meant for a smile. Unquestionably this fact pleased him.

"Give the sentry your arms," he said. "You are under arrest."

Dave fell back a step or two.

"He means business," he called over his shoulder to his friend in English. "And once he gets our guns there's no knowing what will happen."

"Well, we don't give them up until we're sure," answered Joe promptly, throwing his weapon forward as he spoke, and covertly preparing for any action that might be forced upon them. "Talk to him, old boy; maybe you can bring him around."

The Mexican had followed Dave with cat-like tread; his sword was now held at arm's length, the point not more than a foot from the lad's chest.

"Halt!" commanded he. And as Dave

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turned his face toward him once more, the man went on : " I have met with impudent Americanos before this. And I know the way to deal with them. Lay down your rifles ! "

Instead of doing so, Dave's grip tightened about the stock of his weapon ; the officer saw this and without another word his arm drew back for a swinging cut. Dave threw up the barrel of his rifle to guard his head ; the barefooted sentry saw the motion and read in it peril for his officer, for his musket lifted instantly, pointing at Dave. But Joe, in his turn, saw this, leaped forward and grasped the sentry's arm ; the muzzle of his piece was thrown up just as it exploded ; and the captain went staggering back, fear in his face.

" Guard ! Guard ! " he shouted. " Help ! Would you see me murdered ! Guard ! "

From the soldiers' quarters straggled the guard, as unkempt a lot as one would wish to see ; each grasped a musket, and each

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was much excited by the shot and the sudden alarm. A horde of Indians, men, women and children, also made their appearance and pressed toward the scene of action. There was an excited hubbub of voices ; the musket barrels shone in the sun ; and the tattered soldiery eagerly fingered the locks as though anxious to take up their duties at once. At a word from the excited captain they formed a slovenly line.

“ Disarm those Americanos ! ” directed the officer. “ And put them under a close guard. We shall see if our lives are to be threatened by intruders in this way.”

The grim mouths of the Mexican guns were turned upon the two lads who now stood with their backs to an adobe wall ; for a moment or two things looked very bad for them ; but then a new element showed itself which put a new face upon things.

Through the press of Indians, who made no offer to take a part in the proceedings, a half dozen buckskin-clad men shouldered

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their way. From their coonskin caps to their moccasined feet they looked a hardy lot; and in their faces was that resolution which comes in time to all those who are accustomed to face danger.

Each carried a rifle in the hollow of his arm; and silently they placed themselves between the two boys and the soldiery. One of them, a rather small young man with sandy hair and mild gray eyes, stepped toward the captain.

"Just a moment, señor," said he, in Spanish. "If you'd like to listen, we've got a word or two to say for the boys, before your men carry the matter further."

For a moment it seemed as though the Mexican officer would order his guard to fire upon the intruders; but the cool, resolute air of the men in buckskin caused him to alter his mind. Holding up a hand in a gesture which bid his men await his further commands, he said surlily:

"Well, señor, and who are you?"

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The young spokesman of the party smiled.

“What! and is it possible that you’ve forgotten me so soon?” said he.

“Are you the Hudson Bay man?”

“No.”

A light seemed to break upon the Mexican.

“You are of Young’s band of trappers,” said he with a smile which held an under-current of cunning. “To be sure. I had all but forgotten you.”

The young spokesman nodded, good-humoredly.

“That you’d done so, señor, shows that we’ve been giving you little trouble,” said he. “And now,” with a certain bluntness of manner, “let us come to the present matter. As it happened, we saw the affair between you and these lads. As far as I can see they are in no way to blame. It was your sentry who fired the shot, and ——”

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"Wait!" interrupted the commander of the village. To the sentry he said: "Rascal, did you fire your piece?"

"My officer," replied the man, "I thought you were ——"

"Enough!" snapped the captain. "I will see to you later."

With a wave of the hand he dismissed the guard; the men went straggling back to their quarters; the group of Indians, puzzled and disappointed, also melted away; then the captain turned to the spokesman of the trappers.

"You see, señor, I am fair. I want to do only what is right. Please so inform your comrades, for I see they know little Spanish. And then ——" here he leaned forward, with a cunning look in his eyes, and whispered the remainder of the sentence into the young trapper's ear.

But the latter, a frown wrinkling his forehead, cut him short.

"No," said he, "nothing like that."

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“But consider,” pleaded the captain ;
“out of good fellowship.”

The young man paid no heed ; to his comrades he said :

“Now, boys, back to camp.” Then to Dave and Joe he added, “Get your mules and come along. I reckon you’re not just what I would call safe in this village.”

The two lads, Joe with his arm through the bridle rein of the tall mule, trudged along at their new friend’s side.

“I’m a thousand times obliged to you,” said Dave Johnson. “There’s no telling what might have happened to us if you hadn’t come along.”

The trapper smiled boyishly.

“Well,” said he, with a little drawl in his voice, “I reckon the captain was a trifle anxious about you two.” Then inquiringly, “Know much about these parts?”

“No,” replied Joe Frazier. “We’re just from on board ship.”

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The other nodded.

"I thought it was something like that," he said. "If you had known the lay of the land, you'd not have been so ready to tackle the captain. He's just the very person you'd 'a' fought shy of. You see, the Mexican government has these pueblos, or Indian villages all along here, and they don't like Americans to come prowling around and finding out things. If you haven't a passport they'll arrest you, steal everything you've got and drive you out of the country. Or it might even be worse."

"We knew that passports were needed, but we left the schooner in a hurry, and never gave them a thought. And," added Dave, "they were very difficult to get in the first place."

The trapper chuckled.

"I don't know much about getting them," said he. "Fact is, I never tried. None of Young's men have 'em, and the

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captain back there's been walking on thorns ever since we've been here trying to find a way of arresting us." Seeing the boys' inquiring look, he added, quietly, "There's eighteen of us in all, and each one knows a trifle about shooting. So you see, the captain hasn't found the job an easy one."

They had walked on some little distance, when he continued :

"A couple of days ago the captain hit on a neat little plan. You see some of our men," and his voice lowered a trifle so that the trappers in advance might not hear, "are a kind of a rough lot, and they'll drink if they get the chance. The captain's plan is to give them liquor, and then when they're helpless, take away their rifles and hatchets and knives, and pen them up somewhere. Young got wind of it, and we're keeping our eyes skinned until we're ready to take the trail back to Taos."

About a mile south of the Pueblo of Los

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Angeles they came upon the trappers' camp, a row of huts made of boughs, sod and bark. A number of buckskin-clad men lay about upon blankets or buffalo robes ; others were cooking the evening meal at the camp-fire ; while others again were cleaning their rifles or honing their broad-bladed hunting knives.

"There's Young, the trader who took out this expedition," said the young trapper. "What are your names, boys? I'll introduce you."

"Mine's Dave Johnson ; I'm from Boston," announced that young gentleman.

"And I'm Joe Frazier, from Charleston," said the other. Then, curiously : "What's yours ?"

"My name's Kit Carson," the trapper informed them ; "once of Kentucky, later of Missouri, but now of Taos and Santa Fé."

CHAPTER II

AROUND THE CAMP-FIRE

THE two lads were warmly greeted by Mr. Ewing Young, the Taos trader and leader of the trapper band.

"A rather narrow squeak," was his comment, when told of their misadventure; "the captain back there at the Pueblo is anxious to get his revenge upon an Americano because of the trouble he's had with us, and you lads would have pleased him well enough."

Ewing Young was a very well-known trader and trapper. Some time before he had sent out a company in search of fur from Santa Fé toward the Colorado River country. On their way they were attacked by an Indian war party; after a desperate fight against great odds, the hunters were

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forced to fall back and make their way toward New Mexico once more.

“But that just made me fighting mad,” said the trapper chief to the boys, “so I got together a party of forty Americans, Canadians and Frenchmen. At about the head of the Salt River we came on that identical war party which had so roughly handled my first company.”

Kit Carson laughed as though at some amusing reminiscence.

“I never saw any parcel of humans so tickled as those redskins were,” said he. “They had licked us once, and they figured they’d do it the second time even quicker than the first.”

The boys were seated upon a bearskin which one of the men had thrown upon the ground for them; night was settling and the camp-fires blazed cheerily; strips of venison, from the tenderest portions of bucks which had fallen before the rifle that day, were being roasted at each fire, and

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the savory smell filled the air. The horses and mules belonging to the outfit were safely picketed a little distance off; the adventurers laughed and chatted and performed the duties of the camp in high good humor.

"I reckon, Cap'n," said one old grizzled fellow with a wrinkled, weather-beaten face and the clear eyes of a boy, "that them thar reds hadn't any idee how many there was of us. If they had they'd not been in such a precious hurry to come to hand grips."

"And the captain didn't want them to know," Kit Carson informed the boys. "He picked out a nice likely place and put about twenty-five men there in ambush. The Indians off there in front noticed us halt to do this, and got it into their heads that we were kind of chicken-hearted in the matter. And as the rest of us started toward them they made a charge. We fell back until they were well into the trap.

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Then the boys in the ambush jumped up and gave them one volley ; and away went the whole band of warriors as fast as they could go, and never once looked back to see what had happened to them."

"I counted fifteen braves who'll never draw another bow 'cept in the Happy Hunting Grounds," said the grizzled old trapper. "And besides that, there were the wounded. That's the way to hit at the varmints ; and it's the only way to make it safe for a white man to set his traps along the streams in this region. Teach 'em a lesson, says I ; and make it one that they'll not forget, while you're about it."

But while the savages were defeated they were not altogether discomfited ; for they doggedly held to the trail of the trappers. Along the Salt to the San Francisco River, they had pursued them, and all the way along this stream to its very head waters ; their depredations were secret and under cover of darkness ; the men learned to avoid

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the camp-fires, for at any moment a deadly arrow might come hissing from the darkness; horses and mules were killed and maimed; traps were stolen constantly.

"The loss of the traps crippled us," said Kit, "and at the head of the San Francisco, Mr. Clark split the party in two; only what you see here continued on through the desert; the others took what pelts we'd trapped and turned face about for New Mexico."

During all the talk of the company's adventures and through the supper which shortly followed, Kit Carson noticed that the two boys were strangely silent. Now and then they showed an interest in what was said by the trappers about them; but for the most part they sat looking into the fire or talking in a low tone. But when the meal was done and the men broke up into small knots about the fires, the two approached the young trapper. They talked for a space upon different topics, and

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finally, after some little hesitation, Dave Johnson said :

“ Being from Taos, you might know a half-breed Mexican named Lopez.”

Kit Carson smiled.

“ Well,” said he, “ seeing that half the Mexicans down that way are half-breeds, it would be a hard way to pick a man. But the name Lopez is not the same as Smith or Jones,” he added thoughtfully. “ What kind of a man is your half-breed for looks ? ”

“ Rather well made, wears rings in his ears and has a knife cut across his left cheek.”

A gleam of surprise came into Kit Carson's face.

“ Has the man anything to do with your being here ? ” he asked.

“ He has,” said Joe Frazier. “ We are in search of him.”

“ I thought something was wrong from the way he acted when I saw him at noon.”

“ You saw him ! ” Both lads came to

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their feet, their rifles in their hands.

“Where?”

“Sit down,” said the trapper, quietly. “Don’t get excited. It’ll do you no good, for you couldn’t go looking for him to-night, anyway.”

And as the boys resumed their seats on the bearskin, he went on.

“I didn’t know this breed by the name of Lopez. I’d seen him often at the trading posts and the Indians called him Spotted Snake. To-day as I was riding back to camp here, with some small game that I’d been after, I met him on a badly winded horse. I was surprised to see him so far away from his usual hunting grounds.

“‘Hello, Spotted Snake,’ says I to him. ‘What are you doing here?’

“At first he set out to make believe he didn’t know me and that I must have made some kind of a mistake. But in a couple of minutes he saw that it wouldn’t do, and climbed down to real facts.

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“ ‘ You with some trappers ? ’ says he.

“ ‘ Young’s crowd,’ says I.

“ ‘ Does he want another man ? ’ he says.

“ Now I know that Spotted Snake is a good trapper, so I says to him :

“ ‘ Maybe.’

“ ‘ Good,’ says he. And then : ‘ Going away from here soon ? ’

“ ‘ Not for a week,’ says I.

“ And with that,” said Kit Carson, his eyes on the boys, “ he lost all interest in joining us. A few hours later I saw him headed south with a band of Pueblos and Mexicans who had been making ready for a big hunt.”

There was a moment’s silence ; then Dave Johnson asked :

“ What sort of a country is it to the south ? ”

“ Fine country if you stick to the water-courses. Lots of game ; and,” as an after-thought, “ lots of redskins.”

“ To-morrow,” said Dave to his friend,

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"we'll send the mule back to the man we borrowed it from. Then we'll each buy a horse and some other things that we need, and we'll be off to the southward after Lopez."

Kit Carson regarded the lads quizzically.

"It'll take a good trailer to follow that party with any chance of overtaking them," he said. "And outside that, it's a mighty dangerous thing for two people to get out there without anything to back 'em up. The reds would gobble 'em quicker'n it takes to tell it." He studied them for a moment longer and then said quietly, "If the thing's not too much of a secret, let's hear it. You've got a reason for wanting to come up with Spotted Snake; and, who knows—maybe if it's a good enough one—I might be able to help you."

"It seems to me," said Joe, sturdily, "every person we've met to-day has to listen to our troubles. But I guess," comically, "we'll have to saddle you with the story, too, Mr. Carson, if you're to under-

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stand how we came here and what we're after."

"It has been all of six months ago," spoke Dave, "though I've about lost track of the time, that we left New Orleans in the bark 'Gloria Santos.' She traded all along the coast until we came to Rio Janeiro; then we shifted to the English square rigger 'North Star,' which carried us around the Horn and to Valparaiso. At that city we got passage on the trader 'Gadfly,' which worked along until we reached the mouth of the Los Angeles River."

"You came alone on this trip?" asked the trapper.

"No," replied Joe.

"That's what I thought," said Kit.
"But go on."

"My father's been thinking of making the voyage for the past five years," said Joe. "And he thought he'd wait until Dave and I were old enough to join him. Dave and I are cousins, you see."

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“But we never knew what his object was until we reached this coast,” said Dave. “Then we found that he had a sort of map or plan of a particular place on a California river, which had been given him by an old seaman for whom he had done an important service while they served under MacDonough on the Lakes in the last war with England.”

“Plan of a place on a river, eh?” spoke Kit. “Well, I’ve trapped along all these streams and while they’re good for beaver and other fur bearing critters, still I don’t see anything about them that would take a man all that way a-looking for them.”

Dave glanced about at the groups of trappers as though to make sure that he was not overheard; bending forward he whispered something in Kit Carson’s ear.

“No!” exclaimed the trapper, incredulously.

Both boys nodded a vigorous affirmative.

“The old seaman who gave my uncle

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the map," said Dave, "had visited the country years ago. He was sure that there were great quantities of gold in the beds of all the streams. He was very old when my uncle met him, and that is why he didn't make the venture himself. The map was made by him on a spot where he had seen the Indians washing out gold to make ornaments."

"It may be so," said Kit, slowly. "They find it just that way, I'm told; so why not in California as well as any other place?"

"The captain of the 'Gadfly' was short handed when we got to a village down the coast, and he hired a Mexican and this half-breed, Lopez, to help work the schooner. The Mexican deserted at the next stop, but Lopez remained with us. In a little while we found why this was. Things began to be missed. Two nights ago as I came on deck I found him lying on his stomach looking down the open skylight into my uncle's cabin. There was a

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light burning in the cabin and my uncle sat at a table with a small metal box before him, going over its contents. It was in this box that he kept the map and his other valuables. I spoke to Lopez; he got up, muttered something and walked away. This morning the half-breed was missed; a half hour later the box was also discovered to have disappeared. It took us only a moment to put the two things together; then Joe and I put out on board the mule, looking for him."

"Your father didn't join in the hunt?" said Kit to Joe, and there was an inquiring note in his voice.

"My father," said Joe, "isn't able to ride. He's a cripple; lost his right leg by a cannon shot at the engagement on Lake Champlain."

"I see," said Kit. "And if the map was to be recovered, it was for you two boys to do it." There was a short silence; then the trapper spoke again. "I see now why

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Spotted Snake was so anxious to get away from this section as soon as he could." Then inquiringly, "Is it your idea that he took the box just because of the money value of the things in it?"

"He couldn't have known of the map——" began Joe breathlessly. But the trapper interrupted him.

"Don't be too sure of that," said he. "You are never sure of what a fellow like that knows. He goes sneaking about, peeping and listening, and often he finds out more than he's given credit for."

Dave was about to make a reply to this, when suddenly there was a commotion in the darkness. The voice of one of the trappers posted to the north of the camp as a guard was heard calling sharply :

"Halt! Stand where you are!"

Instantly the groups about the fires melted; each man seized the ever ready rifle and fell back out of the red glow. The chief of the trappers, Mr. Young, went

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forward, and voices were heard in a sort of parley. Then the two boys saw the captain of the Pueblo advancing, a half dozen of his soldiers at his back.

CHAPTER III

THE TRAPPERS TAKE THE TRAIL

"PARDON!" cried the Mexican, jovially, as he advanced. "I hope I do not intrude, gentlemen."

The chief of the trappers, who had approached the fires with him, bid him welcome.

"Sit down," said Mr. Young. "Glad to see you."

The officer did so; and his men squatted within the circle of light, blinking like so many owls and holding their muskets across their knees.

"Soon you will be leaving the Pueblo," said the captain. "I am sorry. Not once have you accepted my hospitality."

The grizzled old trapper who had spoken to the boys when the company's venture

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was being related, laughed at this declaration when it was translated.

“Trouble with that Greaser is that he is too public in his invitations,” grinned he. “If he wants to treat us so consarned bad, why don’t he do it privately? I reckon nobody here’d refuse.”

There was a laugh at this; and one of the Americans who spoke some Spanish called to the captain across the firelight:

“Very well, señor, if you want to be sociable, we’ll not discourage you.”

The Mexican smiled in an oily fashion and rubbed his thick, strong hands. He spoke English very badly, but at once entered into a conversation with some of the men.

Kit Carson, who, with the two boys, had not returned to the camp-fire at the officer’s approach, stood leaning upon his rifle, watching the strangers.

“Up to some of his games,” the lads heard him mutter. Then to them he said:

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“Move quietly and follow me; I reckon I’ll be able to show you the reason for the captain’s visit.”

Softly he stole away westward from the camp, the boys following in his steps; when about two hundred yards distant he made a *détour* toward the south and after some little time paused.

“I think the Greasers took this way when they approached,” said he.

Then slowly he stepped along in the direction of the distant firelight; the night was a moonless one, but the stars twinkled in the light-colored sky and they were enabled to see without difficulty. Quietly they paced along among the trees, until at length the trunk of a giant cottonwood reared itself a little to one side.

“Ah!” said the trapper, “I think I noticed that tree before.”

They approached it; upon the far side it showed a large hollow at the base. The long rifle barrel was poked into this and

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struck something that gave out an unusual sound.

"I thought so," said Kit, and with that he put down his gun, reached into the crevice and rolled out a heavy looking keg.

"What is it?" asked the boys, in a breath.

"Liquor!" replied the trapper. "And put here by that Greaser a while ago. And before he leaves camp to-night he'll see to it that our men know where the stuff is hidden."

"But what is his object?" asked Joe, puzzled.

There was a little pause; the trapper's moccasined feet prodded the keg; then he said:

"You see, all this region is claimed by the Mexican government. A license is needed to hunt and trap hereabout. And they refused to grant one to an American. When we reached here the captain undertook to arrest us, but we showed fight.



“WHAT IS IT?” ASKED THE BOYS

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Ever since then he's been trying to get our fellows intoxicated ; once let him succeed, and the rest will be easy for him."

He drew a heavy, short-handled hatchet from his belt. With one blow the head of the keg was stove in ; the strong liquor rushed out and sank into the ground.

"And so," said Kit, humorously, replacing the hatchet in his belt, "there's that to set against the captain's little game. There's not enough left to make even a tarantula feel lively."

They took the same way back to camp ; no one had missed them ; and they found the Mexican officer all smiles and ready to leave.

"Good-night, Señor Young," he was saying to the leader of the trappers, as he shook his hand. "Good-night and pleasant dreams. To-morrow, in the morning, I will come again." He said this with an unpleasant smile which made Kit Carson nudge Dave Johnson meaningly. "In the

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morning I will come again ; and from then on, señor, I hope to see much more of you."

" Good-night," said Young.

The Mexican hitched his sword belt into a more comfortable position.

" Good-night, gentlemen," said he, with a wave of his hand to the trappers. " You are all brave fellows ; and like brave fellows the whole world over, you accept all that circumstances put in your hands."

As this was put into English for them by the comrade who knew Spanish, the men laughed and exchanged mysterious nods and winks.

" You see," said Kit, " he's got them primed to fall into his trap. And they'd do it as sure as shooting—if"—and he laughed softly—" the trap was not already sprung."

With a final wave of the hand, the Mexican officer strode away followed by his men ; and no sooner had he disappeared than Kit was at the side of his employer

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telling of the plot. Mr. Young's face grew dark with anger.

"I'd like to repay him for that," said he. "But," with a gesture, "what's the use? I suppose, after all, it's his way of doing his duty." Then with sudden resolve, "There will be a constant danger of that kind all the time we are here; so at sunrise tomorrow we break camp and head for the Gila River."

As the leader turned away, Kit Carson turned swiftly to the boys.

"And, so there you are!" said he. "You have the luck with you, boys. It's the best chance that could turn up. Come with us and you'll be following right in the trail of Spotted Snake."

"But my father," cried Joe, as he caught his breath.

"We've got an Indian boy here that's been hanging around camp," said Kit. "He's to be trusted. Send him back with your mule, and also write a message to your

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father. Tell him to come ashore and hire a couple of Pueblo Indians to carry him in to the Mission of San Gabriel. The priests will look after him; they have good food and he'll be safe."

"But," said Dave, "couldn't we start for the coast now and make arrangements with him in person? It's only a little more than thirty miles there and back. We could make camp again by sunrise."

This seemed to strike Kit as a good notion; he sought out Mr. Young and put the case of the boys before him. The chief trapper nodded, slowly.

"I don't like the idea of greenhorns," said he. "And then we're out to catch fur, and not to trail thieving half-breeds. But if the thing's important and there's no other way of doing it, all right."

"Well," said Kit, to the boys, "as there isn't any time to lose, let's see to your mounts." He led them to the place where the horses were picketed; the animals lifted

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their heads at the approach of the trapper ; some snorted and pawed the ground as though anxious to be off on the trail once more. Mr. Young pointed to a pair of fair sized mustangs which stood side by side.

"They ought to do," said he. "They are sound, not excitable and have speed."

"Couldn't have made a better pick if you'd gone over the entire lot," said Kit, approvingly.

"But won't we be depriving some one of a mount?" asked Joe.

"Horses are plenty in this country ; and cheap, too. You can have these for the price we pay for the ones we buy to replace them."

This was eagerly agreed to ; there was little more said ; the mustangs were led out, bridled and saddled ; and the boys, good riders both, swung themselves upon their backs.

"By daylight," cried Dave, as he waved his hand.

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“And if we’re a little late,” called Joe, his impatient mount prancing under him, “we’ll try and pick up your trail.”

“Good lads,” laughed Kit Carson; and then with another salute they were gone into the darkness.

A strong guard of trusty men was kept about the trappers’ camp that night; Mr. Young was an experienced frontiersman and so took no chances with an enemy of the Mexican captain’s type. No one was permitted to leave camp for fear that the keg discovered by Kit was not the only one “planted” by the cunning official. At the first streak of dawn the trappers were astir; breakfast was cooked, traps and other equipment packed upon the horses used for that purpose, and everything was ready for the start.

“Looks as though our young friends were going to fail us,” spoke Mr. Young. “If they do, I’m out the price of two good ponies.”

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"They'll not fail unless something happened them on the way," said Kit Carson, who had taken a fancy to the cousins. "They are a clean-looking pair, and I think I'd back them to do more than hold to a bargain."

The trappers, with their packhorses in the center of the column, moved off down the Indian trail; they had gotten entirely out of sight of the Pueblo of Los Angeles, when a distant shout caught the ear of Kit Carson; his sharp eye swept the hills which rose about them; across a ridge to the north two horsemen were coming like the wind.

The trapper wheeled his mustang and dashed back; the newcomers were Dave and Joe, weary and sore from the unaccustomed labor of the night, but both game and willing, for all.

"It was all right," proclaimed Joe, delightedly. "Dad didn't take to the thing at first, but we had him talked over in

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half an hour. The captain of the schooner knows a priest at San Gabriel ; they are going to get a party of the mission Indians with ponies and a litter as you suggested ; and he'll stay at the mission till we return, or he hears from us."

The cavalcade reached the Mission of San Gabriel in the afternoon. This mission was the most wonderful sight in the Californias of that period. It had farming land stretching for miles about, tilled by the thousand Indians which it maintained ; over its ranges wandered seventy-five thousand head of cattle, also huge herds of horses, mules and sheep. Mr. Young had no difficulty in replacing the ponies sold to the boys ; horse-flesh was low as he had said, and, especially at San Gabriel, very plenty.

Kit Carson earned the friendship of a young Pueblo, loafing on the steps of the mission building, by presenting him with a small trinket.

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"Some Mexicans and Indians went through here yesterday," said he.

"Trap!" said the youthful savage, laconically. "Much hunt on Gila River."

"A man was with them—much cut on face," and the trapper illustrated the character of the scar.

The young Indian nodded.

"Big cut!" agreed he. "Long time ago."

Kit nodded to the boys as they turned and rode after their party.

"We're right behind them! If we have good luck, Lopez, or Spotted Snake, as we called him in Taos, will be where we can get our hands on him by sundown tomorrow."

CHAPTER IV

INDIAN SIGNS—AND INDIANS!

THAT night the trappers camped upon the banks of a small stream ; their supper was of game shot during the day and corn-cakes made from the meal in one of the packs.

Both boys noticed that much care was taken as to the picketing of the horses, also a guard was placed over them. The camp was laid out with a plain regard for defense as well as for comfort.

“ You never can tell in the wilderness just what is going to happen,” said Kit Carson, in answer to a question of Joe’s. “ The Pueblo Indians are mostly a mild lot, and never go upon the war-path ; and the other redskins are too well fed around the mission to make trouble. But war

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parties of one nation or another are apt to be met with any time."

The trappers placed their saddle pads on the ground and threw their blankets over them ; these, with saddles at one end for pillows, were their bed. The boys followed their example.

"But keep yourself out of the firelight," warned Kit. "It's a dangerous habit to get into, this hanging around the camp-fire. And always keep your rifle where you can reach it the first grab. Seconds count in a night rush of these copper-colored varmints ; so always fix yourself right before you go to sleep."

The men talked and smoked their pipes about the fire for an hour or two after supper ; then, after a guard had been set, they, one by one, rolled themselves in their blankets and soon were asleep. For some time, however, the boys lay awake ; the crackling of the logs on the fires, the stamping of the horses, and the stirring of the

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breeze in the trees was new to them ; and then from the hills and the forests the faint voice of the wilderness called to them as it calls to every one, telling of its rushing rivers, its trackless wastes, its splendid game, its breathless dangers. And, also, somewhere ahead was Spotted Snake, and as they grew heavy eyed and slow of thought, they seemed to realize for the first time what the pursuit of him in such a region as this might mean ; months might go by without a sight of him, and many and nameless perils might be met by the way.

At dawn on the following day the camp was astir ; breakfast was cooked and eaten, packs were adjusted and made fast ; then the party mounted and began the day's journey. It was a picturesque cavalcade ; each man led or rode beside a packhorse or mule ; across his back was slung his rifle, in his belt was his hunting knife, his whetstone and his hatchet ; his clothing was of

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soft buckskin, fringed and ornamented with porcupine quills, dyed in many and brilliant colors.

The country through which they passed was an ever changing one; streams were crossed; paths were forced through green ravines; mountainsides were conquered; thick woods were encountered everywhere.

Toward the middle of the day the boys found themselves riding ahead of the trapper company, with Kit Carson; after a time he grew silent and seemed to be studying the ground as they went along. At length he drew in his pony and waited until Mr. Young came up.

"The signs say that a company of trappers went over this route not long ago," he said to his chief. "And I think it might be Spotted Snake and the party he engaged with."

"Like as not," replied the other, his eyes searching the ground.

"The trail leads away to the left a little

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piece on," observed Kit. "I think I'll have a look at it with the boys. We'll bring up with you in a little while."

Upon a nod from Mr. Young he rode forward, the two eager lads at his side; they also studied the ground; hoof marks there were to a certainty; but what told Kit they had been made by a trapping party, they were puzzled to know.

"It's plain enough," said the young man when Joe had put the question to him. "Each man in the party rode a pony and led a pack-mule; no other party but a trapper's is ever made up like that."

Off to the left they turned, following the trail as it led toward a distant range of hills.

"It's rather a peculiar move," spoke Kit after a time; "and no direction for a company to take which aims to trap on the Gila River."

For a full hour they rode in the track of the strange preceding expedition; they had

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reached a section covered by small knolls or hillocks, some crowned by growths of dwarfed trees, others bald and desolate. Suddenly Kit Carson reined in his pony and swung himself from the saddle ; without waiting to be told, both boys did the same. They quickly led their mounts behind one of the knolls ; and when the trapper halted, Dave Johnson asked :

“ What is it ? ”

“ Tie up your mustangs,” was the only reply.

The boys did so ; then, following the cautious example of the trapper, they scrambled up the steep sides of the hillock ; it was one of those upon which the dwarf trees grew so thickly ; they lay among these and looked toward the east.

“ Take a steady look now, off toward the southeast,” said Kit, one hand pointing in that direction. “ Do you see a hill which looks something like a horse’s head—right against the sky ? ”

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The thick mass of dark growth which topped a distant knoll was unmistakable; and both lads replied in a breath.

“ Yes ! ”

“ Well, strike a line to the left again—on a hill further away—a bald hill something higher than the others.”

Joe Frazier was the first to catch the object indicated.

“ A horseman,” said he.

“ An Indian ! ” cried Dave Johnson, an instant later, and with a keener vision.

“ An Indian it is,” spoke the trapper, his eyes holding to the distant figure.

There was something in his manner which caught the attention of the boys.

“ There were Indians a-plenty back at San Gabriel and at the Pueblo,” said Joe, “ but you did not pay much attention to them.”

Kit Carson smiled.

“ No,” said he, quietly. “ Those redskins didn’t call for much attention. But this is

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one of a very different kind. You never catch his sort planting or plowing or tending cattle ; he's a warrior, and if you were close enough to him I think you'd find that he is armed with lance, bow and arrow and tomahawk."

The savage horseman was so far away that he made but a tiny speck against the sky ; but for all that he was an ominous figure in that desolate land, a sort of symbol of the danger it held for the intruding pale-face and an unspoken threat of what would befall if he dared to press further into a region never meant for him.

For some time the warrior sat his horse in perfect stillness ; it was as though he were surveying the country round about for signs of danger, or, more probably, for signs of prey. Then he suddenly turned his horse and disappeared from the summit of the knoll.

The three mounted once more and continued in the trail they had been following ;

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the boys noted that the trapper looked at the priming of his rifle, and they did the same. They had no notion of what to expect ahead ; but that their guide considered it more or less serious was plain. Another hour went by ; then they reached the bald hillock upon which they had seen the solitary brave. In a hollow about a hundred yards away was the remains of a large camp, the fires of which were still smouldering ; all about it the ground was trampled by the hoofs of hundreds of horses. From the top of the hillock Kit Carson studied the scene.

“ There must have been four or five hundred redskins camped here up to a few hours ago,” said he. “ The brave we saw was about the last to leave.”

“ But the trappers with Lopez, or Spotted Snake, are among them,” said Joe. “ They have walked right into a trap, for their trail leads into the Indian camp.”

But the trapper shook his head.

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“There were Indians and half-breeds in that company of trappers,” he said, “and they are mostly on good terms with the others of their kind. And the fact that they left the track that would have taken them to their hunting grounds, and took one leading straight to the big redskin camp, shows that they knew of it and made for it of their own accord.”

“But why?” asked Dave.

The trapper shook his head.

“I don’t know,” said he. “There may be a thousand reasons for it; but we’d never guess one of them, like as not, if we tried for a month.”

They spent a few minutes examining the Indian camp; then they rode back at a smart pace until they struck the trail of their own party. When this was overtaken it was found to be encamped for the night.

After supper, Dave and Joe noticed Kit in earnest conversation with the chief trapper. The two men talked in low tones,

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but now and then the boys caught a disconnected word. "Indian" was one of frequent occurrence, "war party," "trail," and such fragments gave them something of the color of the conversation.

"They seem to think that there's danger in the air," said Joe in a whisper.

The two, having in mind Kit's warning, sat beyond range of the firelight; the trappers were as usual gathered in groups; a vigilant guard was stationed off in the darkness upon each side of the camp.

"I suppose it's the size of the Indian party," spoke Dave to Joe. "Here there's only a score of us; what chance should we have against, say five hundred, if they made up their minds to attack us?"

"Not much, I guess," replied Joe, soberly. "But, after all," with a hopeful note in his voice, "it's not likely that the redskins know we're around. And their trail as they left their camp led directly away from us. I noticed that particularly."

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However, the trappers' camp was one of precautions that night ; the horses were not only picketed, but hobbled as well to prevent a stampede.

"That's a fav'rite little game with the reds," the grizzled old trapper, whose name was Matthews, informed Dave. "You see, we couldn't get along without horses to carry our camp stuff and traps and pelts ; so if they can scare the critters and set 'em off wild with fright, they've broke up our trip and got us at their mercy."

But the night passed peacefully enough, as did the next and the next. Nine days after leaving Los Angeles, the company sighted the Colorado River. All thought, or all fear at least, of redskins had left the trappers ; a camp was pitched near the river and the traps were made ready for an operation against the beaver.

"I'll send a party of seven up-stream and the same number down," said Mr. Young on their first night on the Colorado. "The

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others with the two boys I'll leave with you to guard the camp."

"Right," said Kit Carson, quietly.

Next morning the parties, taking a few of the horses, set out to range the river according to the leader's plans. When they had gone, Kit, with the help of old Matthews, the boys and the two other men left behind, picketed the horses upon one side of the camp; the small bales of fur were built up in a complete circle, forming a sort of breast-work.

"An arrow would never get through these bundles of pelts," said Kit as he regarded the "walls" of the camp with critical approval. "Even a bullet would have something of a job doing it."

Everything belonging to the expedition, except the horses, was brought into the circle of hides. This had scarcely been done when the camp was startled by a sudden shout from old Zeke Matthews. He had been seeing to the mules, and now ran

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toward the enclosure, his rifle ready in his hands.

“Injuns!” he shouted. “A whole tribe of them!”

Startled, the little party leaped upon the rampart of hides. Advancing at a slow, swinging gallop across the soft turf that stretched away from the river was a perfect cloud of redskins.

CHAPTER V

WHITE VERSUS RED ON THE COLORADO

THE feathered head-dress of many colors waved gaily above the advancing braves ; the streamers of their long lances danced in the breeze ; their lithe ponies covered the ground in cat-like leaps.

“ Not a war party ! ” said Kit Carson, as he eyed the horde keenly. “ But that makes little difference in this country ; they use the Mexicans they come upon much as they please—rob them—make them prisoners, or turn them adrift unarmed. Sometimes even worse has happened.”

“ Well,” said old Zeke, grimly, as he looked to the priming of his rifle, “ we ain’t Mexicans, and I reckon there’ll be nothing like that happen here.”

With one accord, as they reached a point

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within a hundred yards of the camp, the Indians threw their mounts back upon their haunches and leaped to the ground; then about a dozen of them came forward, signaled the whites, and with much ostentation laid aside knife and tomahawk, long bow and quivers of arrows. Then with upraised hands and every gesture of good-will used by the red men upon such occasions, they came toward the fort. As no protest came from Kit Carson, old Zeke Matthews looked at him with eyes of wonder.

"I say, Kit," said he, "when do you reckon it'll be time to wave them varmints back?"

The other shook his head.

"I'm thinking of letting them come in," said he.

The old trapper's eyes grew bigger than ever.

"Wal," said he, "I've lived most of my life with Injuns near at hand; but I ain't never got so as I could trust 'em. These

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braves look as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths; but give 'em a chance and they'll have their scalping knives at work amongst us, quicker'n you could say Jack Robinson."

"I think," said Kit Carson, to the boys, "this is the band our friend Spotted Snake and his friends joined some days ago. If it is, we may have a chance of getting back your map. And if it isn't, why, we'll try to see that no harm is done, anyway."

The half dozen or so redskins who formed the "talk" party were now close at hand; Kit called to them to halt, and spoke to them in one of the several Indian dialects which he knew. In after years this great frontiersman could hold a conversation in their own language with any of the nations which roamed the plains. He was but twenty years of age during the trapping venture of Ewing Young to the Californias, and so had not become as familiar with the red men as was the case later.

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And so when the "talk" party failed to understand him, he tried them in another tongue. This too failed; and so he invited them within the enclosure so that he might converse with them in the sign language which almost all Indians know. A tall brave, evidently a chief, was the first to enter the fort; he was a sullen-browed fellow enough, flat nosed, and with a face pitted by smallpox. But he gestured his perfect good-will, as did his companions, holding out their empty hands to show that they were unarmed.

Curiously they inspected the enclosure; the great quantity of furs plainly interested them; the pack-mules, the arms and camp equipment excited nods and grunts of appreciation.

Kit was engaged with the chief, endeavoring to make him understand his signs; the savage comprehended slowly, his mind apparently being more given to the treasures of the camp than what the trapper was

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saying to him. As Kit was asking for information with regard to Spotted Snake, both Joe and Dave were eagerly interested, watching the signs and trying to interpret the chief's replies.

In a little while the trapper felt a hand placed upon his fringed sleeve; looking around he saw Zeke Matthews at his side.

"Judging from the indications," spoke the old trapper, "I reckon this here chief don't know English. And that being the case, I make bold to tell you in that language that there's about forty more of them come inside the fort since you began to talk."

That the men would admit any more of the savages to the enclosure, or even allow them to approach the wall, had never occurred to Kit; however, now that he was aware that they had done so, he showed no signs of haste or alarm. His quiet gray eyes ran around among the Indians who had adroitly wormed their way within the circle of pelts; coolly he took in all the

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details of the scene ; calmly he gauged its possibilities.

The savages, grinning and with growing aggressiveness, were thronging up and down within the little enclosure ; a second glance showed the trapper that though the " talk " party may have entered unarmed, the others had only made the appearance of doing so. Under their clothes they carried hatchet and knife, sure testimony of their intentions. The swift, cool brain of the young trapper took in this fact and valued it properly in an instant ; and almost as quickly his plans were made to meet the peril.

The odds were overwhelming ; within the fort there were ten redskins to each white man ; in all, the savages outnumbered the hunters almost a hundred to one. But this fact had little effect upon Kit Carson ; his arrangements were as quiet and methodical as they would have been had the numbers been equal.

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"Go quietly among the men," said he to old Zeke. "Get them over here with all their arms ; but, whatever you do, don't let the bucks get an idea of what's going on."

The veteran trapper nodded and leisurely made his way through the throng of savages.

"It looks bad," said Dave Johnson. "There's enough of them to crush us into the ground just by sheer weight."

Kit Carson nodded.

"If they were white men," said he, "there wouldn't be anything to do but wait till we were sure of what they were going to do—and then surrender. But, they being Indians, the thing's something different. Redskins will never take a chance with death, and that's a fact that's saved the lives of many a band of trappers. Let them be sure that some of them are to die, and they'll begin to play 'possum. Their style of fighting is to always have the upper hand. Otherwise there's no fight."

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Old Zeke passed the word calmly to his comrades ; and one at a time the men sauntered across the circle and joined Kit and the boys. It was as though they had no object in the movement except to dawdle about, talk, and encourage their visitors to make themselves at home. When all six of the whites were finally together, rifles in hand, alert and ready for the desperate chance which meant life or death to them all, Kit Carson said quietly :

“ Now, boys, when I give the word, each pick out a head man and cover him with your rifle. I’ll take the chief with pock-marked face. At the slightest movement that looks like resistance—fire ! ”

The men nodded ; the steady gripping of the rifle stocks alone told of their purpose ; their thumbs were on the triggers ; their eyes were upon the redskins. Then Kit’s soft, drawling voice said :

“ Now ! ”

As he spoke his rifle came to a level, the

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muzzle within a few feet of the stalwart chief; the three trappers and the two boys followed his example; each of the grim black tubes stared a savage in the face.

With dismay the Indians fell back into a huddled mass at one side; not for an instant did the long rifles waver; in the barrel of each was a messenger which meant death; they knew the deadly aim of the palefaces of the border and that they seldom missed their mark. The chief with the pitted face now found a fund of halting Spanish, and he addressed the trappers.

“ We come as friends ! Are not the white men our brothers ? ”

With his cheek against the stock of his rifle and his gray eye glancing down the barrel, Kit Carson replied :

“ Leave this camp ! And leave it at once. Stay and you are all dead men.”

There was an instant's pause—an instant full of suspense ; then the chief spoke to his braves. They made no answer, but gathered

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their gay colored robes about them and sullenly filed out of the little fort; and they never paused or looked behind until they were safely out of rifle shot.

"There will be a grand pow-wow," said Kit, as they watched the great band of savages join those just expelled from the fort. "And if the chief who spoke has the say, I wouldn't wonder if we had a little fight on our hands before sunrise. He had fire in his eye as he left."

One by one a chief or head man harangued the redskins; suddenly there was a chorus of shrill yells and a scattering for their ponies; then, mounted, they formed a half circle, and with lances held high and bows ready for deadly work, they sat facing the camp of the whites like so many graven images.

CHAPTER VI

TWO NIGHTS OF DANGER

AT sight of the great array of armed and mounted savages facing the little fort, the two lads from the East felt that sinking sensation which usually comes to those not bred to physical danger. At the crisis within the camp neither had felt the slightest fear ; the thing was so sudden and so desperate that they had no time to think of themselves.

But this new situation was different ; their minds had time to grasp the consequence of the attack and they felt uneasy. It is probable that Kit Carson understood something of what they were feeling ; more than likely he had once gone through it himself ; at any rate, he said :

“ This doesn't mean much, lads ; the reds are going to run rings around us, maybe,

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and do a little fancy shooting. But they'll keep out of range of our guns, and so, of course, we'll be out of reach of their bows. They are great fellows for that kind of exhibition."

But Kit was mistaken. Instead of making the attack expected, a man rode out the half circle of horsemen and approached the camp—one hand uplifted, the palm toward the whites.

"It seems to me," said Kit, his eyes upon the horseman, "I know that gentleman."

Dave Johnson uttered a cry.

"It's Lopez!" exclaimed he.

"Down, lads, behind the wall; don't let him see you; I'll palaver him and maybe strike some kind of a bargain for your property."

Accordingly the boys crouched behind the bales of pelts; Lopez advanced easily upon his pony until he was within a dozen yards of the camp. Then he drew rein and sat grinning amiably at the trappers.

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“Well, Spotted Snake,” said Kit Carson, leaning upon his rifle and quietly surveying the half-breed, “how is it I find you in company with a band of hostiles?”

Spotted Snake grinned more widely than ever.

“They are not hostiles,” he said, in Spanish. “Very good Indians. Mean no harm. You got frightened.”

“They may be very good redskins, as you say,” replied Kit; “but good or bad I’d rather not have many of them around with hatchets and scalping knives hidden in their blankets.”

The half-breed laughed.

“They didn’t know you’d take anything they did in bad part,” said he. “They are not used to dealing with white men, and so don’t know their ways.”

Kit pointed to the crescent of armed warriors facing the camp.

“I suppose that, too, is a sign of good will,” said he.

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"Red Cloud is a big chief," said the half-breed, "and he is very angry at the way you've treated him. He's mounted his men and put them in fighting formation just to show you what he would look like if he really wanted to do you harm. He told me to tell you that his five hundred braves would dash over you as the waters of a mountain stream dash over the rocks in the time of freshets."

"You've lived long enough among whites and have enough white blood in you, Spotted Snake, to know that talk of that sort won't carry very far. If Red Cloud wants to see how far his young men can dash over us let him have them try it on. We can guarantee him twenty-five dead, and himself among them."

The half-breed grinned and nodded.

"I've told him that already," said he. "But he was bound to have me come and 'make talk.' If he could have scared you in the first place your furs, traps, horses

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and rifles would have satisfied him, I think. He's not a half bad sort of fellow when you come to know him."

"A while ago I asked you how you came to be in company with this band," said Kit. "I don't think you answered me."

"The trapping party I went out with fell in with them about ten days ago. They made us a good offer of pelts if we'd join them in a big buffalo hunt, they not having any rifles. As it was good business, the chief trapper agreed."

"The last time I saw you was at Taos," said Kit. "How is it I find you away up here?"

"I got out on the coast," said the half-breed, "and joined a ship. But the work was too hard," with his ever present grin. "I left them at Los Angeles."

"Ah! you were the fellow, then," spoke the trapper as though surprised. "I heard about your desertion."

"You heard?" and even from that dis-

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tance Kit saw the man's lids narrow into slits through which his sharp eyes peered.

"A couple of the ship people were looking for you; they hinted that you'd sort of clung to some property which wasn't altogether yours, when you left."

The half-breed nodded.

"They told you that, eh? Well, maybe it was true and maybe it wasn't. But, anyway, I'm not sorry for my little voyage on the sea; it promises to be something that will pay very well; and that's the kind of thing Manuel Lopez is looking for these days."

"Suppose," said the trapper, "the ship people were willing to pay something down for what was taken. Would you consider it?"

Lopez, or Spotted Snake, snapped his fingers airily.

"This is a thing that could hardly be paid for," he said. "It's only a chance, of course, but it's such a big one that ready money is not much temptation."

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“It happens that the folks who lost this property on the ship are friends of mine,” said Kit. “And being friends, I’m willing to help them out. Maybe, if money can’t buy back the things you’ve stolen, lead can.”

As he spoke he threw forward his rifle, the stock against his hip, the muzzle covering the half-breed. But the latter calmly sat his horse and looked at the trapper.

“Don’t forget,” said he, “I came here under what the Indians regard as a flag of truce; don’t forget that I am their spokesman, and that if anything happens to me they will take their revenge.”

This result was very well understood by Kit; to shoot or otherwise harm a man sent forward to parley by the savages was a very great indignity and one which would excite them to the limits of their fury. But that he held the matter at all seriously was kept hidden from Lopez.

“You saw us drive them out of camp a while ago,” said he, coolly; “that ought

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to have shown you how much we fear them."

"Another thing," said the half-breed, equally calm, "even if I had taken the things you speak of, would I be so great a fool as to carry them about with me? If they were of value, wouldn't I have cached them somewhere along the trail?"

Kit Carson knew that Spotted Snake was a cunning, covetous fellow, brave and willing to go a long way to carry out his desires. As the matter stood, he feared that he had spoiled any chance that the boys might have had to recover the map, by putting the man on his guard. He was considering what he had best do under the circumstances, when the half-breed shook his rein and rode nearer the barrier.

"In Santa Fé," said he, "there is an old man by the name of Diaz—Goat Beard, the Indians call him. He keeps a storeroom at one side of the town, buys furs and sells goods of all sorts to the Indians."

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“I know him,” said the trapper. “An old rascal.”

Lopez grinned.

“Maybe,” said he. “But he is very useful at times. He has often transacted little matters of business for me in a very capable way.”

The trapper got a glimmer of the man’s meaning, but more by his manner than his words. He nodded, as though he understood ; but he said nothing.

“Maybe,” proceeded the half-breed, “if you were to go to old Diaz during the summer when the trapping season is done, some arrangements could be made in any matter that you care to speak of.”

Again the trapper nodded.

“California is a fine country ; but I don’t care as much for it as I do for New Mexico,” said Lopez. “And, then, trapping is my business and not ——” but he stopped short, as though not willing to commit himself to anything that would definitely incriminate

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him. "Anyway," he continued, "look for old Diaz in the hot months; he may have something to say to you."

Here he wheeled his horse, calling over his shoulder :

"And remember, Red Cloud is a friend to the paleface. His brother does him wrong when he thinks Red Cloud means anything but good feeling."

The spotted pony which the man rode raced back to the solid crescent of braves. Whatever Lopez reported had the effect of dismounting them; they picketed their horses and went into camp, outside the range of the white man's fire.

The fire at which the supper of the six was cooked after nightfall was masked so that the light might not attract a flight of arrows from any of the bucks who might be lurking in the darkness. The horses were well within rifle shot and were hobbled so that to stampede them would be impossible. However, a guard was kept over

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them ; and during the night not more than one of the whites slept at a time.

Morning dawned, and they saw the smoke ascending from the redskins' camp-fires ; apparently the warriors had remained all night as they had been at sunset. During the day Red Cloud and one of his braves visited the fort and were admitted ; the chief in his halting Spanish protested the utmost friendship ; but all the time the whites noted his evil little eyes coveting everything he saw in the camp, and so their suspicions were not abated. The second night passed much as the first ; the little party did not dare sleep, for there was no telling at what moment the quiet of the night would be broken by the yells of the red horde, a sleet of arrows, and the leaping of demon figures over the barricade. At the beginning of the second day there was a stir in the Indian camp ; preparations were being made for a movement of some sort.

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“They mean either an attack, or to break camp,” said Kit Carson, as he watched them for a space. “I am not sure which.”

The braves swung themselves upon the backs of the ponies, fully armed as before ; in a sweeping line they faced the little fort, the ponies snorting and prancing, the grim riders as still as death.

“Fire when they reach a distance of seventy-five yards,” said Kit, resting his rifle barrel upon the wall of furs, and throwing himself upon the ground. “You’ll then have time to reload. And make every shot tell.”

The five remaining rifles were also rested upon the wall, and the five riflemen sought cover behind it. The air was charged with the electricity of a coming struggle ; and when the very moment seemed to have arrived, there was a shout from the river, the sound of hoof-beats, and up dashed the chief trapper, Young, and his six buck-skinned followers. At the sight of these

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reinforcements the redskins fell into a sort of confusion. And while this lasted Kit explained the situation to Young.

"I don't think they'll make any movement against us now," said the head trapper. "What do you say?"

"I think you're right," replied Kit Carson. "If they took two days to make up their minds to tackle six men, it'll take 'em a week to get to the point of facing twice that many."

"Well, by that time," said Young, grimly, "there will be still more of us; for I mean to break camp, move down the stream, pick up the rest of the boys and then strike for the Gila."

Half the party set to work, adjusting the bundles of pelts upon the backs of the mules; the remainder, with ready rifles, watched the Indians. When everything was in marching shape the trappers started along the river bank. The band of savages followed in their track during the entire day; but

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one by one the remaining trappers were picked up ; and when at last the sun went down it showed the hostile band encamped upon a hillside not more than a half mile away. But now instead of six there were a full score of deadly rifles between them and their prey.

CHAPTER VII

HOW THE TRAPPERS RETALIATED

THE Indian band lighted large fires upon the hillside that night; the tall figures of the braves could be seen flitting to and fro in mysterious activity. The trappers watched the unusual spectacle for quite a long time without comment.

"They are fixing up some kind of a disagreeableness for us," spoke old Zeke Matthews, at length. "And I opine, Cap'n Young, that I'd better take a little scout out in that direction and see what it is."

"All right," said the head trapper. "If you care to take the risk, Zeke, go ahead. But I'm not asking you to do it, mind you."

"I'm going to do this little pilgrimage for my own private amusement," said the veteran, humorously. "I always did get a lot of fun out of a passel of redskins when

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they were getting downright serious at their work."

He took up his rifle; and a heavy pistol was stuck in his belt. Then he crept out of camp and away into the darkness.

Two hours had elapsed when he returned. He put down his gun and warmed his bony hands at the cheerful blaze.

"The varmints are having a mighty interesting time of it," he said. "That's a council fire you see blazing up there on the hill; and they're sitting all around it, smoking their pipes and making speeches to each other. Old Red Cloud is anxious to get his hands on our outfit, I guess; but his braves want to see their way to getting it without being hurt."

"Council, eh?" said the chief trapper. "Well, we'll have some kind of action before long. It will be either one thing or the other."

A powerful guard was placed all about the camp; but the night went by without

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any hostile sound from that of the Indians' ; toward dawn the council fire upon the hillside died down ; when the sun finally showed its great, round, red face over the top of a distant mountain, the whites, to their astonishment and relief, saw the camping ground of the foes deserted. Not a savage was to be seen anywhere.

“ It was a good council ! ” spoke Kit Carson, grimly. “ Either Red Cloud is a wise chief, or his young men have good eyes for danger.”

But there was no trusting the red men, who were known to be cunning foes ; a party of the trappers set out upon their trail and followed it for some hours. There was no sign, by the end of that time, that the retreat was a ruse ; so the trailers returned to camp. The mules were burdened with their packs of furs and camp equipment once more, and again the outfit moved down the river.

“ It seems a hardship to move away from the place where I know Lopez to be,” said

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Dave Johnson to Kit, as they rode side by side.

“ I feel the same way,” said Joe Frazier. “ In the last hour I’ve had it on my tongue a dozen times to say to you : ‘ Let’s stay where we are until we make that rascally half-breed give up his plunder.’ ”

Kit Carson shook his head.

“ I understand just how it is, I think,” said he. “ But to stay behind here, just the two of you, would be to throw your lives away.” He regarded them seriously for a moment, and then continued : “ I’ve been thinking over this little affair of yours, and about what Spotted Snake had to say ; and I’ve made up my mind that the best thing you both could do would be to go right on to Santa Fé.” Again he paused for a moment, then continued : “ Your father’d be willing to pay a little to have this map returned, wouldn’t he ? ”

“ Yes,” said Joe. “ That is, if we couldn’t get it any other way.”

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The trapper laughed.

“Of course,” he said. “And we’ll try that other way first. I think it is wrong to knuckle down to the half-breed’s demands. But Santa Fé is the place to get in touch with him again, one way or the other ; and I think you can ease your mind and leave this section, knowing that it’s the best thing you can do.”

This sounded like logic to the boys ; and so they put all uneasy thoughts behind them, and gave themselves up to the labor and excitements of the trappers’ life. Day by day the expedition continued down the Colorado, setting their traps and reaping a big harvest of beaver fur. When they reached tide-water they changed the scene of their efforts to the Gila River, which enters the Colorado at about this point ; and they trapped along the Gila day after day with wonderful success until they came to the mouth of the San Pedro.

At this point the saddle-horses of the

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trappers had been pressed into service to carry the treasure of furs. So fortunate had the trappers been that with hundreds of miles of stream before them they had already reached their transporting capacity.

"It is a hardship for us to have to let this great chance slip," said Young one night at the camp-fire. "Beaver has never been so plentiful, and I feel sure that it will continue so all the way up the river. But there is no sense in our going on taking furs if we have no way of carrying them; so the only thing I can see to do is to take the trail for New Mexico and sell what we've got."

Old Zeke Matthews sat listening to the head trapper, honing the edge of his great hunting knife and nodding his head in agreement with him. But at the proposition that they leave the remainder of the stream untouched, and make for their market, he protested.

"It's just flying in the face of Nature,

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that's what it is," said he, earnestly. "Here we have luck raining down on us ; and we're going to turn our backs on it."

Kit Carson smiled at the old man's indignation.

"Well, Zeke," said he, "what else is there to do? If we have no horses to carry the pelts, what's the use of taking them?"

"Get horses," returned the old fellow, laconically.

There was a general laugh from the men lounging about the fire.

"Where can we get them?" asked Young, good-naturedly.

"The Injuns have 'em," declared Zeke. "There's a village less than two hours' ride from this camp where there's a whole drove of horses and mules that the reds have stolen from the Greasers."

There was a silence ; Zeke rubbed away at his knife and went on :

"They're a thieving lot, and it'd be a just punishment on 'em to lose the nags. And

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that ain't all! When we set out on this trip who went for us tooth and nail but this same gang of varmints? We punished 'em for it, but we didn't punish 'em enough. If white men are to come into this country the redskins must be taught to go easy on the bow and arrow, and the hatchet and knife. So I'm for giving 'em a lesson before we strike this camp."

A murmur went up from the men. The idea pleased them. They had not forgotten the attack of the Indians upon their venturing into the wilderness; and to strike a blow in retaliation, more especially such a businesslike blow as that suggested by Zeke, appealed to them.

Long and earnestly the matter was discussed; and finally it was agreed upon. It was a savage country and a rough time; and the thoughts and opinions of men are always moulded by their surroundings and their needs. However it may look to us to-day, to impress the herd of mules was not from

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the trappers' point of view at all contrary to the laws of justice. They regarded it in the same light as the commander of an army did the requisitioning of supplies in the country of the enemy.

Next day a half dozen men were left to guard the camp; the balance of the party, with Dave and Joe pressing joyously on in their midst, set out upon their errand. After a ride of a couple of hours the band sighted a large mixed herd of horses and mules. These were grazing some little distance up the San Pedro; and a scout or two was sent to locate the Indian village.

"It's off to the west, there," said old Zeke. "I was there once, trading; and the varmints robbed us of everything we had."

After a short time the scouts returned. The village, a clutter of dirty huts, lay in the direction indicated by Zeke; and the band of buckskin-clad trappers rode toward it under cover of the timber.

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"There it is," said Kit Carson, at length pointing through the trees.

The village lay quietly in the sun; it was a barren, neglected place; the bucks lolled in the doorways of the low huts; in the narrow fields the women were preparing to plant the scanty crops.

At a word of command the trappers shouted to their mounts; at full speed they dashed into the village, their firearms rattling and snapping briskly. Yells of fear and rage went up from the savages; they grabbed up their arms, and their deadly arrows began to hiss through the air.

"Open order," called the chief of the trappers. "Don't ride so close together. Load and hold your fire until I give the word!"

The horses were brought to a standstill outside the town; the trappers reloaded their rifles and looked to the state of their pistols. During this pause in the attack the savages recovered from their surprise;

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and upon a sort of plain, stretching away to the river, they rallied their forces. The village was quite a large one; several hundred warriors faced the trappers, and from their furious actions it was plain that they meant to make a most desperate defense.

“Ready?” called the head trapper.

“All ready,” was the answer from his men.

“Hold your fire till I give the word,” said the leader, once more. Then lifting his hand: “Charge!”

Down rode the trappers upon the redskins; and the latter bent their bows with practiced hands, the keen eyes of each selecting a mark.

CHAPTER VIII

KIT REACHES SANTA FÉ ONCE MORE

THE open order of the whites and the rifle fire which came like a thunder clap at the command of their leader discomfited the savages; the arrows flew wild, and as the horsemen came plunging at them, their small arms crackling, they broke and ran toward the river.

For perhaps a mile the trappers pursued them, more to keep them on the run and discourage another rally than anything else; then at a shout from Young they wheeled about and made for the herd on the other side of the village.

Calmly the victors selected the best of the animals, some of their number watching for the possible approach of the redskins. But the latter were too completely demoralized to venture an attack, so the trappers rode

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away to their camp leading a full score of pack animals, sufficient to carry all the fur they'd be likely to take, even with the best of luck, during the remainder of their work upon the Gila.

"That kind of a little lesson ain't lost on the reds," said old Zeke, after they had reached camp and were settled down watching their meat cooking over the coals. "They won't be so ready to pitch into every company of whites they see for some time to come."

From then on the party continued up the Gila River until they reached New Mexico; luck had continued to favor them and when they finally entered Santa Fé they had two thousand pounds of beaver fur.

"At twelve dollars a pound," said Kit Carson, "that's about ——"

"Twenty-four thousand dollars," spoke Joe.

The trapper looked at him admiringly.

"I never had any schooling," said he,

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“except what I got from old Kin Cade one winter up north of Santa Fé. It'd take me some time to calculate that ; and here you do it in your head, like a shot.”

“Was this Kin Cade a schoolmaster?” asked Dave.

The trapper laughed.

“No ; he was an old fellow I stumbled on once, away up in the hills when I first came here. He lived all alone in a hut ; and he knew more about the mountains, about Indians, animals and fish than anybody I ever met. He taught me Spanish and a couple of the Indian languages ; also he showed me how to tan deerskins so that they would be soft and pliable, to dye them, to make them into hunting shirts, leggins and moccasins. Indian feather and bead work I also got from him. Kin was a wise old man.”

The trappers who had followed Ewing Young so hardily through all the perils of the mountains and deserts, of field and

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flood, were now given their share of the money brought by the pelts; they at once proceeded to Taos and there the company disbanded.

However, Kit Carson and the two boys remained in Santa Fé.

“Spotted Snake is or will be here,” said the trapper. “So we’ll just look around a little and see what we can see.”

Santa Fé then had a mongrel population of some three thousand; its sun-baked adobe buildings, its gaily clad Mexicans in trousers slashed to the knees and adorned with rows of buttons, great sombreros and high colored mantles; the barbarous peoples from around about, who came in to trade, the half-breeds, the picturesquely clad frontiersmen from the north, all served to give this city, renowned in the history of the Great West, a most unusual appearance.

The first morning there Kit Carson sought out a bronzed old trader who was outfitting for a trip among the Indians.

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"Buck," said the trapper, after they had greeted each other, "have you seen anything lately of that 'breed' they call Spotted Snake?"

"What do you want of him?" demanded the trader, surprised. "I should think you'd be well satisfied to let varmints like that alone."

"This is a little matter of business," said the trapper. "I'm not hunting him from choice, but because I must."

The trader grunted. From his manner it was plain to the boys that he held Spotted Snake in no great esteem.

"Well, if you must see him, I'll do my best for you," he said. "The Snake was seen in the town only a few nights ago; a couple of my men met him and heard him doing a lot of wild talking about making a fortune—about gold which came so thick that you could gather it up in buckets. The sun must have struck through his sombrero," added the trader, drily.

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The trapper looked at the boys, and they returned the look with troubled eyes.

“I reckon though,” went on the trader, “if he did have anything valuable, he’d put himself in the proper company to get rid of it. Remember that fellow they called ‘Moccasin’ Williams up in Taos? Well, he was one of them; and,” with a nod of the head, “I think that speaks for itself.”

Kit and the two lads walked slowly down the narrow street.

“Moccasin Williams, eh?” said the trapper, thoughtfully. “Yes, as Buck Morgan says, he speaks for himself. There’s not a bigger rascal in the southwest. Once was a miner in old Mexico, I believe; and later lived among the Blackfeet and the Comanches. I’ve even heard it said that he was a renegade and took part with the redskins in attacking many a wagon train.”

That the man had been a miner inter-

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ested both Dave and Joe vitally. A chill struck their hearts as they thought of the brave old veteran of MacDonough's victory who waited away there in the Mission of San Gabriel for news of his boys and the map of the treasure country.

"Maybe we'd better go to see the man Lopez mentioned to you," said Joe.

"Goat Beard?" said Kit. "Yes, I'd been thinking of that. It won't do any harm to go talk to him. The 'breed' must have heard that our company's got back, and so knows we're around somewhere."

They passed quickly through the town; at the far side was a squalid section mostly occupied by Indians and the riff-raff of a frontier settlement. A wretched sun-baked adobe house with very low doorways and a generally forlorn aspect bore some straggling lettering across the front.

"This is old Diaz's storehouse," said Kit. Inside, the place was deep with shadows.

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Cured pelts and buffalo hides were heaped in corners ; traps hung from the ceiling ; rifles, clothing, knives, hardware, pottery and examples of feather work were displayed for sale.

A fat old woman, a Mexican half-breed, came waddling forward.

“ A blessing on the brave Americanos,” wheezed she in Spanish. “ You are our first patrons of the day. Good luck be with you ; and what will you have ? ”

“ Where is Diaz ? ” asked the trapper.

The old woman threw up her fat hands and wagged her fat head.

“ Diaz ! ” she cried. “ He is here ; but he is almost mad ! Never have I seen him so wrought up, and I have been married to him for forty years. But,” with the facility of much practice, “ what will you have ? I can buy, sell and trade as well as Diaz. What will you have ? ”

“ We want to see your husband,” said Kit.

“ See him ! ” Again the old woman

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flourished her hands. "Impossible, señor! He will see no one. He has met with a misfortune!"

From the back of the storehouse they now heard a wailing voice lifted to a pitch of great distress.

"Oh, a blight is on me," it droned. "A darkness is shut down upon me. Never again will such a chance be mine. To think of it! A river running with gold—clear, yellow, beautiful gold!"

At this the three Americans looked at each other with quickened interest; the old woman wrung her fat hands and took up the wail.

"Running with gold, señors—a large river whom no one but the Indians have any knowledge of. And now the paper is gone. We shall never see it again."

Kit Carson leaned his rifle against a heap of wolf skins; to the woman he said:

"We must see your husband, señora; the matter is of great importance." Then,

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as she shook her head stubbornly, he added :
“ It is about this paper ; tell him that.”

The woman gave him a greedy look ; then as fast as her unwieldy body would permit, she scuttled to the rear of the storehouse and through a curtained doorway. Beyond this there came a babble of excited voices ; then the woman reappeared followed by an old man with bent shoulders and a long, chin beard.

“ Señors,” squeaked this latter, in a thin, trembling voice, “ I welcome you. You have come to bring joy to my old heart, have you not ? You have come with an offer from the señor of the moccasins ? ” eagerly, as his ratty old eyes ran from one to the other. “ Sit down. Be comfortable. Let us approach this business quietly and with freedom.”

The trapper folded his arms across his chest and leaned his shoulders against the bare clay wall.

“ We were told by Manuel Lopez to seek

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you out when we arrived in Santa Fé," said he. "It is on a business about a paper which he has—a paper which he took from the schooner 'Gadfly' at Los Angeles."

The quaking hands of Goat Beard began to gesture; his halting old tongue was striving to form a reply, when the curtains at the rear doorway were once more pushed aside—and Lopez himself stood before them!

The half-breed's eyes were bloodshot and feverish; his brown hands trembled as badly as those of the old man.

"So you are here, are you?" said he, after he had stood staring at them for a moment from the doorway. "You are here, and looking for the map."

He threw up his hands, pressing them tightly to his forehead; then he began to laugh in a way that made the flesh of the two lads creep.

"He's like a madman," whispered Dave to his cousin.

"Something has happened," replied Joe,



“SO YOU ARE HERE?”

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in the same low tone. "And something that means ill luck for us, I'm afraid."

Kit Carson made no movement nor answer; he continued leaning against the adobe wall, his strong arms folded across his chest. After a few moments the half-breed recovered from his frenzy; but his eyes still gleamed, his fingers opened and shut like the claws on an animal.

"Yes," said he, nodding his head slowly. "I did ask you to come here; and I meant to deal honestly with you, too. But it's too late! I've been an idiot; and I've been robbed!"

"Of the map!" Dave Johnson made a step forward.

"Yes; of the map," replied Lopez. "I began to boast of the great luck I had. I showed the map to Moccasin Williams. He is a miner of experience. He had heard stories of gold in California, and had always wanted to go there. Later, while I was asleep, he robbed me."

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He sank down upon a heap of hides, his hands covering his face; from his manner one who did not know the merits of the case would have considered him an honest man grievously wronged.

“A river of flowing gold,” wailed Goat Beard. “Yellow, beautiful gold! And now we will never know where it is. We shall never see it—never gather a nugget, never a grain of its dust.”

After this outburst there was a moment's silence; then Kit Carson spoke.

“So Moccasin Williams now has the map,” said he. “Have you any idea where he is?”

The half-breed leaped up.

“If I had, would I be here?” asked he, his eyes aflame. “Would I not be stepping in his tracks and hoping for the moment which would bring me up with him?”

“Have you searched the town?”

“I have. To-morrow I go to Taos. Then the settlements all through the hills

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will be searched. I have friends who will help me. There's not an Indian village but will come under our eyes, or hide him from us. And when I find him ——"

Here his gesture finished the sentence—a gesture as deadly in its meaning as the coiling of a rattlesnake.

After a few moments more in the storehouse of Goat Beard, the three Americans left.

"The map is gone, sure enough," said Kit, as they went slowly down the street. "And that this blackguard Moccasin Williams has it, is more than likely."

"But is Lopez to escape punishment?" asked Dave, who tingled with a desire to bring the half-breed to book for what he had done, and the labor, the anxiety, the peril he had caused them.

Kit shook his head.

"Santa Fé is only a frontier town," said he. "And what little law there is is Mexican, and Mexican law don't go very far in

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favor of an American. There are men who'd take the thing in their own hands and deal with Spotted Snake as Spotted Snake says he'll deal with this man Williams if he ever puts his eyes on him ; but we are not that kind. We'll wait ; for who knows what will happen, and maybe before a great while."

That evening the three held council ; and it was not long before they came to an agreement. Joe and Dave each wrote a long letter telling of what they had done and what they meant to do. These were addressed to Joe's father at the San Gabriel Mission. They told him to be of good heart and to remain where he was until he heard from them again.

"We are going to search for Moccasin Williams until we find him," wrote Joe to his father. "And to help us we have the finest fellow you ever saw—a dead shot, and one of the quickest brains on the frontier. It may be some time before we see you again ; but don't worry, dad ; we'll be all

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right, and will come through it all with credit to you."

"Buck Morgan'll be trading up as far as the Colorado this summer," Kit told the boys. "And he'll be sure to find a Mexican or a Pueblo who'll carry the writings to the mission."

Next day this was seen to; the trader, who was the same Kit had interviewed on the previous morning, readily agreed to see to the forwarding of the letters.

"And I'll send a little word of my own," said he kindly to the boys. "You see you're only youngsters and he might think you're plunging into some harum-scarum thing that'll bring you nothing but danger. But if an outsider tells him it's the best thing to be done, it might hearten him up a little."

The boys thanked Mr. Morgan for his good-natured offer and begged him not to let the idea slip his mind; then, with Kit, they rode off toward Taos.

This latter town was even of a more primi-

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tive cast than Santa Fé ; it was smaller and the population was less law abiding. Into Taos poured all the trappers, teamsters and other wild spirits of the country ; and from Taos set out almost all the expeditions in search of fur, trade and adventure. A week was given to the search for Moccasin Williams ; but they failed to find him.

They were careful to make but guarded inquiries for the man ; to have him learn, in case he was skulking anywhere about, that he was being sought, would have no other effect than to frighten him away.

However, the search was thorough for all their secrecy ; and the end was that Taos was given up as a possible hiding place.

Then they took up Lopez' idea of the settlements off among the hills ; weird barbarous places where the Mexicans and half-breeds lived in a most primitive condition ; failing to find any trace of the man the Indians were tried at their lonely villages ; but all to no purpose.

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"He's gone," said Kit, with conviction, one day at the end of summer ; " he's gone as sure as shooting. But where? "

Then one day, on the main street of Taos, they encountered old Zeke Matthews.

" Just now joined Fitzpatrick's company to trap on the Salmon River," he told them, after they had exchanged greetings. " Lot of trapping going to be done this season. Old Cap'n Gaunt went out already. Got some of Young's old men ; I'd have gone too, but you see I've got so's I pick my company very carefully these days."

The trapper and the two boys smiled at the old fellow's manner.

" You didn't like some of Gaunt's men, then? " said Kit.

" Hardly. There's some right down scalawags among them," said Zeke. " Good trappers, mind you. But that ain't everything. I've had too many hard rubs from the Injuns in my day to join a company that's got a renegade among 'em."

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"A renegade," said Kit, and there was a quick snap in his eyes.

"Moccasin Williams," said Zeke.

"So he's gone out with Captain Gaunt's party, has he?" said Kit. "And what country does the captain propose to trap?"

"Oh, the Laramie and the Snake Rivers, I hear," replied Zeke. "About the same section as Fitzpatrick's crowd."

That evening Kit and his two young friends held another council.

"Williams' going out with Captain Gaunt shows one thing very plainly," said the trapper. "Either he's heard of us searching for him, or Spotted Snake's been so hot on his trail that there was nothing else to do. He didn't dare make for California to prove the truth of the map, because he felt that somebody would be sure to be watching for him at the missions or towns."

"What do you suppose his plans are?" asked Joe.

"It may be," said the trapper, looking

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thoughtfully at them both, "that he's gone out with Gaunt just to wait till the search for him dies down. Or it might be that he means to make for the coast by a longer way."

Dave thought of the grim mountain chains, the trackless prairies, the roving bands of Indians, some of whom had never seen a white man.

"A single man could never make his way by that route," said he.

Kit shook his head.

"Maybe not," he said, slowly. "But, at the same time, don't forget that Moccasin Williams has lived among the redskins ; he knows their ways and talks their languages. What would be death to any other might be smooth going enough for him."

"We must reach him before he leaves the trapping company he went out with," said Joe, excitedly. "If we don't he'll get away from us for good."

"Well," said Kit, thoughtfully, "we can't

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follow Gaunt's track by ourselves. The Indians would be down on us before we'd been out a week. But old Zeke says Fitzpatrick's company is going to trap in much the same country as Gaunt. What say if we join Fitzpatrick, and in that way get within striking distance of our man?"

Both lads jumped at the idea; and next morning the three went to see Mr. Fitzpatrick, a trapper and trader well known in the southwest. He was pleased to see them, for men were rather difficult to secure at the time.

The result was that in an hour all arrangements were made; and in a few weeks Kit Carson and his boy comrades had turned their faces toward the wilderness once more.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE HOSTILES

FITZPATRICK, the head of the fur hunting expedition of which Kit Carson now made one, was a hardy, courageous man, a good trapper, and knew the country and its signs as well as any other man of his time.

He led his party almost north ; this course they held until they reached the head waters of the Platte.

Winter was now upon them in the midst of the mountains ; the snow filled the defiles, the icy wind moaned in the naked trees and among the crags. But besides their buckskins the trappers now wore thick furs ; and the warm blood of a vigorous life in the hills and on the prairies made the experience only one of increased pleasure to the hardy border men.

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At each camp enough "half faced" houses were erected to shelter the men from the wind and snow. These were made of boughs, barks and skins and were of three sides and a roof. The front was open, toward the fire; the men slept on fur robes or blankets, their feet turned to the blazing logs.

The Platte was followed slowly, the party taking furs all the way to the Sweet Water, one of its tributaries; and this stream in turn was trapped until they reached Green River. From there they progressed to Jackson's Hole, a fork of the Columbia; then on to the Salmon River where a part of their own band, which had left Taos some days in advance, joined them.

Old Zeke Matthews was among these new men; and at once Kit and the boys began questioning him with regard to any news which he might have heard of Gaunt's men.

"Nothing at all," replied the old fellow.

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"A couple of Injuns came into camp one night and told us that some trappers were at work a little west of us ; but from what they said I'm pretty nigh sure they were Sinclair's party who left about the same time we did."

The entire Fitzpatrick expedition now having gathered, a group of warm huts was erected in a sunny valley, protected from the sweep of the winds ; and as the trappers meant to spend the remainder of the winter there, they were at more pains to arrange the camp, and make themselves comfortable.

Most of the time in this long encampment was spent in dressing pelts and mending and making equipment and clothing. The only hunting done was for food. They were in the country of the Blackfeet, a daring nation of red marauders, but because of the cold the trappers did not expect any troublesome attention from them.

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“They’ll stick to their lodges,” said Zeke; “the varmints don’t like hard weather.”

But that they had all reckoned without the wile of the red man and his desire for the property of the whites was soon made evident. A herd of buffalo was sighted one day on a plain, and a party of four of the trappers mounted and went in pursuit. Just how their fate overtook them will never be known; but that it was sudden and dreadful was plain to their comrades. A band of Indians dashed down upon them and all four lost their lives.

Vengeance shook the camp on the Salmon River; in a fury the trappers armed; but for all their swiftness the savages escaped; not even an eagle plume was seen; and their tracks were lost in the falling snow.

When the spring opened operations were commenced on the Salmon; at length they reached the Snake or Shoshone River; and the giant falls one day burst upon the vision

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of the boys. The lava peaks rose in wild grandeur all about it; the mighty rush of the water awed and amazed even the hardy spirits of the buckskinned adventurers.

Along the Snake they trapped to the Bear; and from there to the Green River once more. Here they encountered a trapper band which proved to be that of Sinclair, of whom Zeke had spoken.

"Captain Gaunt," said head trapper Sinclair to Kit. "Why, yes, I've heard of him now and then since we got up into this country. He put in the winter on the Laramie River; and if I'm not much mistaken he's now trapping somewhere in the South Park."

At once Kit sought out Mr. Fitzpatrick; he told the adventurous Irishman as much as he saw fit of the hunt for Moccasin Williams and the desire of himself and the boys to hunt up Gaunt's band without delay, now that it was located.

"Why, then," said the chief trapper,

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“go, and good luck to you. And it's catch the thief of the world I hope you do. For the like of him is a bigger danger than the Blackfeet themselves.”

Zeke Matthews and another seasoned adventurer named Gordon elected to follow Kit and his young friends in their journey to the South Park.

“The Fitzpatrick company are about through their trapping,” said the first of these veterans, “and there's no use taking a long ride back to Taos, only to turn about and make for the rivers again in a little while after. Gaunt's going to stay; he'll cache his pelts until he's put in a couple of seasons.”

So the four, well armed, set out; and without any notable adventures reached the trapping ground of Captain Gaunt. The latter was a hearty man past sixty, a true type of the Westerner of the time. He welcomed the visitors to his outfit with the utmost warmth. But when Kit spoke of

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the object of their journey he frowned blackly.

"Moccasin Williams, do you say?" he almost shouted; before he could continue Kit laid a warning hand upon his arm.

"Not so loud," said the young trapper; "he'll hear you."

"Well, if he does, he's got mighty good ears," said the downright Captain Gaunt. "For he's away somewhere in the hills with the redskins. And stole some of my best horses when he went."

For a moment Dave and Joe felt that the mountains had toppled over upon them; they had counted so strongly upon the result of coming up with this particular trapping expedition that the shock of disappointment was harder to bear than it had been at any other time. Gone! And they had possibly been within a few days' journey of him frequently; if they had known where Gaunt's men were working they

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could have set out for his camp while there was still hope of success. But now that was at an end.

"We've got it to do all over again," said Joe in a weary sort of way, for the long anxiety had told on him.

"Yes; we must begin at the beginning," admitted Dave. "But," and there was a flash in his eyes, "we'll find him for all that, and we'll find the map too."

Kit and Captain Gaunt were conversing aside.

"I was warned against the fellow," said the head trapper. "They told me he wasn't to be trusted." Then with some curiosity in his voice, "Anything particular you wanted of him?"

"A kind of private matter," said Kit.

"Some sort of rascality, I'll venture to say," was the captain's comment.

Then the five wanderers from Fitzpatrick's outfit held council together. Zeke and the other trapper, as has been noted,

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intended to join Gaunt's party from their start for the South Park ; and now Kit and the lads could see nothing but the same process for themselves. Gaunt was glad enough to secure them, as he had come out with fewer men than he intended, so the routine of camp and trap and rifle was taken up once more.

They had been with Gaunt's men for some time, ever on the outlook for news of a white man among the savages of the region, when one night a band of marauders crept up to the camp. The guard was slack, perhaps ; but that the night was a dark one was a certainty. At any rate the Indians managed to get among the horses without being detected ; and when dawn came, nine of the very best animals were missing.

Zeke Matthews made the discovery, and his whoop startled the camp.

"Injuns," stated he, pointing to the ground, where the "signs" were plentiful

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enough. "And they've driv' off a lot of the hosses."

From some articles of equipment lost by the savages, it was learned that they were Crows; and their trail led broad and plain into the hills. Captain Gaunt surveyed his men.

"I want a party to take the trail, bring back the nags and show the thieves that there's a punishment waiting for every one who doesn't respect the law of the wilderness," said he. "Who will go?"

Kit Carson stepped out from among the men; the boys, who would have followed him anywhere, did the same; in a moment there was a party of a dozen saddling their mustangs and making ready for the chase.

"We'll hold this camp until you return," said Gaunt. "And bring back the horses."

Along the trail sped the twelve, Kit Carson riding silently ahead, his eyes searching the ground. That the Crows were a rather

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numerous party was evident from the hoof-prints of the ridden horses.

"They're ten to one against us," said old Zeke, who was one of the pursuers and whose experienced eyes also searched the trail. "But that ain't of no account. A white man ought to be good for twice that many redskins, any day!"

After following the trail something like five miles it grew greatly confused. During the night a huge herd of buffalo had crossed and recrossed it; but the genius of the wilderness was strong in Kit Carson even at that early time; in spite of everything he never failed to pick up the track each time it was lost.

"The foot of a horse is different from a buffalo's," said he, briefly, in answer to a question of Dave's. "And if you keep a sharp eye on the trail, you'll see the print of a horse every now and then, even among all the buffalo tracks."

All day they rode at a good pace; and by

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late in the afternoon they had covered some forty miles. The horses were jaded, and if they were to be kept fit to continue the trail the next day they must be rested and fed.

There was a clump of trees near by their halting place which seemed an excellent spot for a camp.

"We'll take a rest here," said Kit, "and have a snack. The nags can pick up a little green stuff, too, maybe."

Winter had come again, and the horses, from lack of herbage upon which to feed, were in poor condition. There was a promise of soft boughs and young bark in the grove; the trappers' animals lived upon such fodder in the cold months, and the prospect made them as eager and restive for the camp as their riders.

They were within a hundred yards of the timber when a sound caught their ears. There was a low command from Kit, and the trappers drew rein instantly. Again the

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sound came to them, a sharp yelp as of an animal in pain.

"A dog," said Kit; "and on the other side of the timber."

The presence of a dog in the wilderness is a positive indication of the presence of man at no great distance. There was not one of the seasoned trappers but knew this; and the minds of Dave and Joe seeing the effect upon their companion grasped the fact instantly.

"Redskins!" said Kit Carson. "Look there."

Above the tree tops two towering columns of smoke were ascending; that a camp of some size existed among or upon the opposite side of the trees the whites were now convinced.

"This way," said Kit, as he turned his horse. Some little distance back, there was a rise in the ground; behind this he remembered to have seen a clump of timber something like that which had just been the ob-



“ REDSKINS ? ”

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ject of their attention. Reaching the trees, they dismounted; the horses were tied and then Kit said quietly:

“Boys, we don’t know what’s ahead of us; so the best thing is to have a look over the ground before we make another move. I’m going across this bit of prairie and have a look at that camp over there. It may be the band we are after, or it may not be. In an hour you’ll know. Anyhow, get yourselves ready for action, for we don’t know what may be the outcome.”

He left them among the trees and advanced toward the timber from which the smoke was still ascending. The prairie was a rolling one; here and there cover was to be had; and Kit cautiously advanced from place to place, his woodcraft making him invisible for the greater part of the time from the grove ahead.

At length he reached the edge of the clump; upon his hands and knees he crept forward, parting the undergrowth and low

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hanging limbs that his body might slip noiselessly through. Finally he sighted the camp, and as he did so he settled down with a quick intake of the breath.

Two large fires were burning; and at each was roasting a butchered horse. A company of painted savages, full armed and with the feathers of their war bonnets hanging down their backs, were grouped about. A couple of lodges, strengthened so as to be used as places of defense in case of need, were erected at one side; a little distance away were tethered the horses stolen from the camp of Captain Gaunt, minus the two roasting to provide a feast for the Crows.

Usually keen to suspect the proximity of a foe, the Indians now displayed surprising laxity. Perhaps the great distance they had put between themselves and the trappers was the cause of this; they thought themselves beyond the reach of pursuit, and so were giving themselves up to the enjoyment of their enterprise.

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Kit watched them for some time; then as the shadows began to thicken, he crept away across the stretch of prairie to the place where he had left his friends.

"It's the party we are after," said he. "I saw the horses. The reds are making preparations for a big feast, and haven't any thought of danger."

"Feasting, eh?" said old Zeke. "Well, boys, it seems to me we ought to have a little to say in these festivities. Captain Gaunt reckons on a trifle of powder being burned by way of protest against horse-stealing in general, and it's as little as we can do to go according to his will."

At nightfall the sound of barbaric song came across the prairie; and as the trappers stole toward the Indian camp they saw the red glow of the fires, and through the trees the swaying, contorting forms of the warriors going through a savage dance of triumph.

The Indians had come from the north

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with their booty of horse-flesh, and from the north alone they looked for pursuit; the trappers knew that this would be the case, so they took care to approach the camp from another side. When close enough to see all that went on at the camp-fires of the Crows, they crouched down in sheltered places and waited for the end of the feast.

It was a cold night, and there was some snow upon the ground. And as they waited the whites grew chilled and stiff; their limbs quaked and their teeth chattered. But when the braves had finally eaten their fill and danced themselves tired they laid themselves down to sleep; and soon a torpor overtook the camp.

This was the time for which the trappers had been waiting; Kit, with five others, slipped away to the place where the horses were grouped, freed, and drove them away. Some little distance away the remainder of the party joined them; then a council in

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low pitched voices was held as to what was the next step.

"We've got our horses," counseled one of the men. "The redskins are a pretty powerful band and we're a long way from support. So it's my opinion that we ought to be satisfied with our good luck and start back for camp right away."

A number of the others agreed to this; but Kit Carson said :

"The thieves should be punished. Another thing, our nags are pretty well done up and we'll have to go slowly. Our trail will show the Crows that there's only a few of us; and they'll pursue us. In a thing like this there's a big chance against us; so if we can, we had better shift things around in our favor."

"How's that to be done?" asked the trapper who had favored letting well enough alone.

"We have them now just where an attack would scare them most. Let us

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throw a volley into their camp and charge them ; they'll start running then, and the chances are we'll have nothing more to fear."

"Them words is words of wisdom !" declared Zeke Matthews, slapping the butt of his rifle emphatically. "Strike hard now and we needn't be afraid later."

The trappers, an adventurous lot by nature, at once fell in with the idea. They looked to their weapons carefully ; then with steps trained to softness, they stole upon the Crow camp.

The fires had been allowed to die somewhat ; the plumed head of a lonely guard nodded at the edge of the firelight ; the sleeping warriors, laden with food, never stirred.

Then suddenly a lean dog arose ; his ill shaped head lifted, and he began to sniff, suspicion in every hair. Then he sprang forward, barking loudly to arouse his savage masters. Trained to awake at

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such an alarm, some of the Indians sprang up; and as they did so the long rifles of the trappers lifted, and a volley went whistling into the camp.

CHAPTER X

A DESPERATE EXPERIENCE WITH GRIZZLIES

As the bullets of the trappers sang their way into the Crow encampment, the warriors began to fall; the whites stationed themselves behind trees and reloaded; and while they were doing so the savages sought the cover of the two fortified lodges which they had erected. From this shelter the arrows began to dart; but the thick tree trunks protected the trappers from their barbed heads.

At early dawn the Indians saw how few in number the whites were; at once they poured forth, with tomahawk, war club and scalping knife, to crush them. But at a discharge of the rifles five of the band dropped in their tracks; the others fled into the forts once more.

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"I guess that's about all we'll hear of them," said old Zeke, as he rammed a fresh charge of powder home and topped it with a bullet. "They ain't got the stomachs for such work as that."

"Hold your places," ordered Kit Carson ;
"they will attack again."

A very little while proved that he was right, and Zeke, veteran though he was in Indian warfare, was wrong. Out of the strongholds rushed the Crows, and with yells of fury charged the hunters. So fierce was their attack that the white men were forced to fall back ; but the deadly rifles continued to ring through the dawn and savage after savage fell before them. Three trappers had been left with the horses ; these, hearing the continuous fire, now joined their comrades. The additional rifles were more than the redskins could stand ; completely defeated, they drew off. The trappers did not wait for them to ponder the situation, but fell back to their

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horses; mounting in haste and leading the recaptured animals they headed for the Arkansas River, where the camp of Captain Gaunt was then located.

For some time longer Kit and the boys remained with the Gaunt expedition; then, as nothing seemed to develop in the matter of Moccasin Williams, and as the fur taking had grown poor, the three made up their minds to a desperate venture. This was nothing less than to leave the company of trappers and make their way back to Taos.

"It's a dangerous journey," said Captain Gaunt; "but if your minds are made up, go ahead. You are under no obligations to me."

By great good fortune along the whole of the long route through the wilderness they did not sight a single Indian. Now and then they came upon a cold encampment and other signs of the red man's presence; but never a plume of the warrior himself.

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On the way they trapped and had rare good fortune; when they reached Taos they had a rich taking of beaver pelts which just then were in great demand and consequently high in price. At once their inquiries were put afoot as to Moccasin Williams; neither of the lads had ever seen the man, but Kit Carson's description of him was so complete and they bore it so thoroughly in mind that they were confident that they would know him if they ever met with him.

But the result was the same as before. Old Diaz, whom they visited, shook his head and tugged at his goat's beard sorrowfully.

"I have never laid eyes on him, señor," said he. "Not once since you were here last. And not once have I seen Lopez either since that day. He is away, there," one trembling hand indicating the north, "away among the Crows and Blackfeet searching for the Americano, Williams."

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After a week in Taos, Joe grew restless. He had heard of an expedition, much like that of Young's, which was to head secretly for California.

"It's been two years since we saw my father," he said to Dave. "And it's been almost as long since we wrote to him. Let us go out with this party; after we see him, and if he is willing, we will come back and take up the trail once more."

Seeing how Joe felt in the matter, Dave gave a ready consent; they spoke to Kit, and though the trapper was sorry to lose them, he saw that this was the right thing for them to do.

"Maybe," said he, as he clasped their hands at parting, "you'll be back just as you say. And maybe again you won't, for you might find Williams among the missions up there where you're going, looking for that river of gold that old Goat Beard talked about. But, however it turns out, don't forget that I've got to care a good bit

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about you two boys; and I'm only sorry that I couldn't do something for you that'd help you to get what you're after."

And so the lads went off on another journey through mountain, plain and desert.

Shortly after this, Kit joined a fur hunting expedition sent out by the celebrated firm of Bent & St. Vrain, under the leadership of Captain Lee, once of the United States Army. Later he spent some time on the Laramie River with old Zeke Matthews and two other men, the venture being one of his own. It was returning with this that Kit met with the most desperate adventure that he had taken part in up till that time.

The party had gone into camp one afternoon, and being short of meat, Kit took his rifle and started out to look for game. A mile from camp he came upon elk signs; he followed their tracks until he came in sight of them feeding upon a hillside. Craftily

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he advanced upon them ; but fine as was his skill the elk got scent of him, tossed their antlered heads and broke into a run. Up went the never failing rifle, and a noble buck dropped upon the brow of the hill.

“ A lucky shot,” spoke the trapper, as he stood with the empty rifle smoking in his hands, his eyes upon the fallen buck. But hardly had he spoken the words when he heard a most terrific series of roars ; like lightning he turned and saw a pair of enormous grizzly bears, their eyes red with rage, and their cruel teeth gleaming, charging down upon him.

There was no time to think out a plan of defense ; the grizzly is an immense brute, weighing more than a thousand pounds, and often swift enough to outrun a horse. So Kit dropped his empty rifle, turned about and ran.

The great beasts came lumbering after him, to all appearances awkward and slow, but in reality with astonishing swiftness.

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Kit knew their speed, having had previous experience with them, though none so desperate as this; and he knew that in a few moments, at most, he would be overtaken.

As he ran his eyes went here and there for a place of safety; then, straight ahead, he saw a tree, the branches of which were fairly low. As he came under it, he grasped a limb and with a mighty pull swung himself upward, a blow from the foremost grizzly barely missing him.

The tree had been the only thing the hard-pressed trapper could think of; and no sooner had he gotten settled in a branch than he realized that he was in a sort of trap. Bears are noted climbers; even the enormous grizzlies can ascend trees with ease.

"Yes," muttered Kit, as this came to him, "and they'll be after me like a couple of tornadoes in a few minutes. So I'd better find something or some way of defending myself."

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He still retained his heavy hunting knife, but though the blade was broad and keen he knew that it would be but poor weapon with which to meet the attack of such brutes as the two growling and staring up at him from below.

But still, the knife would be useful, for all. He drew it from its sheath, and began cutting furiously at a thick, short branch which grew at his hand; this was soon trimmed, and as he balanced the heavy club which it made, he said with satisfaction :

“ Here’s something, anyhow ! I’ll not have to meet them empty handed. So, come on, my lads, I’m ready for you.”

The bears needed no invitation, however; they had been measuring the situation from their places beneath the tree; and one of them had risen upon his hind legs, dug his great claws into the trunk and begun to climb upward.

The foremost part of a bear, in climbing

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a tree, is his nose; and the noses of most animals are very tender and easily hurt. The grizzly bear's is no exception. So as the climber came within reach, Kit swung his club; the blow landed fair and true, the bear yelled with pain, and slipped back to the ground. But the other stood ready to take his place; Kit cleared away the small boughs which might entangle his weapon and so interfere with his stroke. Once more the heavy club swished downward, and again it landed upon an eager, uplifted snout. There was another roar, and the second bear slid to the ground. They stood together, and glared at the trapper, their roars and shrieks making the lonely mountains ring. Then, their pain easing somewhat, they attacked once more. Again and again the club struck the tender, bleeding snouts, again and again the bears roared in agony and fell back.

At length they lost heart in the matter and sat watching him sullenly and pawing

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their noses ; but as he made no move to come down, they finally gave up the vigil just as the long shadow of night began to fall ; and with many looks over their shoulders they lumbered away into the woods.

Kit waited for a space ; then he slid down the trunk of the tree and ran softly and swiftly toward the spot where he had dropped his rifle. The piece was still unharmed ; and the trapper reloaded it and stood listening. From the depths of the forest came the sound of the bears crushing through the underbrush ; then this died away in the distance and all was still.

CHAPTER XI

THE BULLY OF THE TRADING CAMP

AFTER making sure that the bears were not returning, Kit Carson shouldered his rifle and made his way back to camp through the gathering dusk. It was dark when he reached there, and this made it unadvisable to take a packhorse after the carcass of the elk ; so the trappers had to be content with rather short commons until the next day, when their rifles came into play and meat was had for the larder.

Joined by a trapping party under Bridger, Kit went to the rendezvous of the Rocky Mountain trappers on Green River. There were about two hundred men in this big camp, which was for the purpose of selling their furs and buying supplies. The trading being done, Kit joined a trapping com-

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pany journeying into the Blackfoot country at the head of the Missouri River. But the redskins made such determined and persistent attacks that the party was forced to retire from their country.

They fell back to the Big Snake River, where they wintered. But the Blackfeet still held the trail; in a desperate battle with this dangerous tribe Kit was seriously wounded in saving the life of a comrade named Markhead; in this fight the savages received a terrible beating.

The spring season was a most fortunate one; beaver was very plentiful and their taking of the fur was rich. Kit's wound got well rapidly, thanks to his strong constitution, and he was soon able to set his traps with the rest of them.

The long journeys through the wilderness to Taos and Santa Fé were too great a strain upon both horses and men; the dangers of the journey were too grave to be undertaken several times a year; and so the

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big trading camp on Green River grew very popular with the trappers. So, the season being over, the different companies all headed toward this station ; the one which Kit Carson was with among them.

As the ponies pranced along the long street of the camp, and the pack animals moved more soberly under their burden of furs, the bronzed trappers waved their coonskin caps and shouted joyously to friends whom they recognized by the way. This great fair of the Rocky Mountain trappers occupied quite a beautiful site ; circling it were the giant hills, crowned with mighty forests ; the huts of the trappers and traders were built among the trees ; some were after the fashion of Indian lodges, others were of bark and poles and sod. But the traders had structures of hewn logs to hold their stores.

Kit rode through the camp, speaking to his friends among those who came forward to greet the newcomers. He was dismount-

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ing when there came a rush of feet and he was seized by two pairs of strong arms. Two enthusiastic voices cried, joyfully :

“ Here you are, at last ! ”

“ We’ve been waiting for you a whole month ! ”

“ I knew you’d come, Kit ! ”

“ We’re back again ; and we’ve got news ! ”

The young trapper wriggled out of the clutch of his assailants ; and one look showed him that they were Dave Johnson and Joe Frazier.

Gripping their hands in welcome, he cried :

“ Why, lads, this is a surprise, sure enough ! I never expected to see you so soon.”

“ We came back with the same party we went out with,” said Dave. “ We heard at Taos that you were out in this region and that you would probably put in the summer at this trading camp. So there was a

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chance with a trader helping with the packhorses, and we jumped at it."

"How did you find your father?" asked Kit of Joe.

"I never saw him looking better," replied the boy. "But come over to our place; we've got a shanty big enough for the three of us. And hurry! We left a pair of prairie chickens roasting over the fire; and we're to have flap-jacks and coffee."

Dave hurried to their hut, which was in a shaded place on the edge of the camp, to see to the chickens; Joe and the trapper followed at a slower pace. The two lads helped to unsaddle the mustang, and Joe picketed him where the grass was rich and thick. Then they all sat down and watched the fowls brown on the spit and the coffee-pot send up its jet of steam.

"Your father wasn't against your leaving him again, then?" said Kit.

"Father has gone back home," said Joe. Then seeing the trapper's astonishment, he

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added: "You see, while he was at San Gabriel he learned quite a lot of things. One of them was that even if we did recover the map and find the place it indicated, we'd hardly be permitted to wash the gold. The Mexican government and population are afraid that the Americans will some day overrun California; and so they do everything they can to discourage them, hoping to keep them away. So father thought there was no use remaining and neglecting his business at home."

"But how does it come that you two were left behind?" asked Kit.

"Well," laughed Dave, "we objected to going back so strongly and made such a general fuss that uncle made up his mind that he'd let us have another try. He took an American ship which sailed from San Francisco and will land him in New York. If we have no success, we are to follow next season."

"I see," said Kit. There was a pause,

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then he asked : " But the news you spoke of? What is it? Did you find something out, among the missions? "

" Not a word," said Dave, " and we spent a couple of months prowling around among them. But," and here he lowered his voice, " on our way here with the trading party we stumbled upon something—as real a piece of news as you could wish for."

" Good," said Kit, his gray eyes snapping, " and what is it? "

" There was a French Canadian named Shunan with the train, a big man, very quarrelsome and ready with his weapons."

" I know him," nodded Kit. " He's a trapper, and," in a puzzled tone, " I don't see what he was doing with the traders."

" He was making for this fair," said Joe. " He had been to the settlements on a sort of mission."

" A mission ! " said Kit.

Both boys nodded.

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“He’s quite loose with his tongue,” said Dave, “and we got the whole thing, bit by bit, at night by the fire. He’d talk to the men, you see, boasting of what he’s done and meant to do. He’d been sent in to Santa Fé to look about and ask questions. The person who sent him was away in the Blackfoot country, afraid to venture into civilization himself.”

Instantly Kit Carson’s quick mind grasped the situation.

“Moccasin Williams!” he cried.

“Right! And the person he was inquiring about was Lopez, the half-breed.”

“Asking if he was in Santa Fé, or in the region round about?”

“Yes; and he found, as we did, that the half-breed was away north, also in the Blackfoot country. This seemed to amuse him. Williams feared to go back to Taos or Santa Fé; he feared to go to California; for there he might meet Lopez.”

“According to what the Frenchman said,

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Williams is in mortal dread of the knife of the man he robbed," said Joe.

"And instead of being safe in the place he selected for hiding, he is really in great danger, with Lopez searching for him, as Shunan heard, from one Indian village to another. It would have been much better if he had returned, or had gone to California."

"Much better for him, perhaps," said Kit, grimly. Then his expression changed and he added: "Well, it's good news enough, lads; and we'll see what can be done with it. The map is still in the hands of Williams; if it were not he'd not be so anxious to get to California. And so, if nothing else, it shows us that we still have him to look for. You were in luck to meet this man, Shunan."

At this the trapper noted the faces of the boys change in expression.

"I don't just know about that," said Dave.

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"We were lucky, in a way," admitted Joe; "but in another way we were not so much so."

"Something's happened," said Kit.

Dave and Joe nodded.

"Somehow," said the former, "Shunan got to know of our interest in what he said in his boasting. It may be that he had heard of us, and, now that we'd got his attention, he'd placed us for the first time. Ever since then he's been trying to get up some sort of a quarrel with us."

"Ah!" said Kit Carson.

He sat looking at the boys steadfastly; and they saw a dangerous, narrowing light in his gray eyes.

"I know Shunan," said he. "I've known him for some time; and as you said when you first mentioned him, he's quarrelsome and ready with his weapons. For him to try and pick a fight with a man means only one thing—and that's a deadly one."

The prairie chickens were done, the flap-

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jacks nicely browned and the coffee piping hot when old Zeke Matthews came along. Immediately the boys sprang up and greeted him; he was invited to join them and did so with alacrity.

“Roasted birds we get out in the trapping country,” said he. “But flap-jacks seldom, coffee seldomer, and coffee with reg’lar sugar in it, never at all.”

And as Zeke ate of these delicacies, Kit told him of Shunan’s desire to quarrel with the boys, though he did not mention the reason for it. The veteran was indignant.

“What!” demanded he. “Can’t he find no one but a passel of youngsters to fight with. Well, all I got to say is, let him look out for himself!”

Released from the restraint of the wilderness where they were ever on the lookout for attacks of savage beasts or savage men, the trappers relaxed; the trading camp was a hubbub of sounds. Songs, the squeak of a fiddle, blustering talk and high pitched

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contention grew constant as each night passed and the day began.

During one afternoon there was a turmoil at one end of the camp, a clash of fists and the sight of bloody faces. Later there was still another outbreak of the same sort. Then little by little the thing increased until the camp roared steadily with strife.

"It's all Shunan," said a trader to old Zeke. "Fellows like that make more trouble than a tribe of thieving Indians."

Once or twice during the day Kit Carson caught sight of Shunan. He was a burly fellow with the air of a bravo; his face was flushed and his eyes gleamed with menace.

"A wolf," said Kit to the boys. "So, to avoid trouble and keep the peace, lay low. If you can avoid it, don't let him see you."

Both Dave Johnson and Joe Frazier were naturally boys of spirit; and their two years in the wilderness with the trappers had given them a confidence in themselves which they might not have had otherwise.

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So the idea of concealment, of practically hiding from a bully, was galling to them.

Kit saw this and said :

“ Your keeping out of his way won't be a mark against you boys. Nobody'll think the worse of you for it, for more seasoned men than either of you will be for many years are dodging this man just now. So take my advice. Lay low. I don't think it will make any real difference in the end,” as an afterthought, “ for if he wants to force trouble on you, he will. But, when the time comes, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that it's not your fault.”

The lads acted upon this suggestion ; and the result was that some time went by without the bully encountering them. But his purpose was plain enough ; frequently he came to that part of the camp where the boys' hut was located, and his remarks when any one happened to be in the vicinity were brutal and offensive. Kit Carson, Zeke Matthews and some others had erected

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lodges near that of the lads ; and they frequently listened to the bully's boasts and threats and insults without a sign.

But finally the thing grew unbearable.

" Human nature," said the veteran, Zeke, " can't stand no more. He's getting worse. He thinks we're afraid of him. Let him talk like that just once more, and my rifle'll answer him."

At length the day came which brought the climax. The bully had kept the camp in hot water all morning ; he had engaged in a half dozen fights with men weaker than himself, and beaten them ; and so he came, roaring like a mountain bear, toward the spot where Kit sat with his friends. As it happened the two lads were in the party. Both looked up at the Frenchman from where they lay stretched upon the ground ; and neither made an attempt to avoid him.

He had grown accustomed to their dodging him ; and now that they failed to move it seemed to inflame him more than ever.

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“It’s a camp full of coyotes,” announced he, squaring himself before them all. “Every one runs when a man comes along.”

There was an ominous silence on the part of the trappers; and he proceeded:

“Did you hear me speak?” he demanded. “Did you hear me mention coyotes? Where’s the Indian fighters that I’ve heard about? Where are they? Did they ever fight a white man? Well, here’s their chance, if they’ve got the stomachs to take it up. Here’s a man that’s willing to give them a chance to make a reputation.”

The silence of the group was still unbroken and the bully’s sneering look ran around the circle.

“All Americans, eh? Every one an American! Well, I’ve beaten all the Frenchmen in the camp; and as for the Americans, I’ll cut a stick some day and switch them around their own lodges.”

Again his sneering glance went over them; then he shrugged his huge shoulders

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contemptuously, turned and started away. But he had gone hardly half a dozen steps when a voice called sharply :

“Shunan !”

The man halted and wheeled. Kit Carson stood facing him. The difference in the two was very great. The Frenchman was a Hercules ; a towering man, with a great chest and massive limbs ; the American trapper was small and quiet in manner and seemed in no way a match for him.

But Kit Carson was never a man to stand back because the odds were not in his favor ; so he advanced toward the camp bully.

“Shunan,” said he, coolly, his gray eyes fixed steadfastly upon the man before him, “we’ve all listened to you talk for some time ; and we’ve said nothing. There are twenty men in this camp who could beat you in any kind of fighting you could name. But they are not trouble seekers ; and so they’ve stood back. Now, I consider myself the least among them ; and being such

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I take it on myself to say that we are all tired of you and your bullying. And, further, I want to say that you will, from this time on, stop your threats, or I'll shoot you."

For a moment the Frenchman stood staring at the speaker, his eyes glowing with fury; then he turned again without a word toward his own quarters.

"Gone for his gun," said old Zeke. "And from his looks he means business."

The group of trappers broke up immediately; sharp action was in the air, and to meet this their experience told them to be prepared. But, seeing, from their faces, what they meant to do, Kit shook his head negatively.

"This is my affair, boys," he said. "So I must ask you all to stand aside while I go through with it."

"But he's got friends in camp," protested old Zeke. "They'll all be out to see him through."

"If they interfere," said Kit, "then I

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rely on you to see me through. But I don't think they will. Shunan has had the run of this camp too long to think he needs help in a little matter like this. It'll be a matter of pride with him ; and you'll see, he'll handle it alone."

Like lightning the news of the impending conflict ran through the camp. The trappers and traders carefully drew out of what they thought would be the line of fire, or placed themselves behind trees or the heavy log houses.

The boys went after Kit and found him tightening his saddle-girth, a little distance from his lodge.

"By all rights," said Dave Johnson, "this fight should be mine or Joe's. We brought the man down this way ; he was always looking for us when he came. And now that trouble has come of it, I don't see why you should shoulder it."

Kit slapped him on the back and laughed.

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“The whole thing is a public one,” said he. “The man has come to be a nuisance and a danger, and so a stop of some sort must be put to him. We have no law in the wilderness, nor law officers. But we know what we want, and somebody always comes forward to put a thing right. In this case it is Kit Carson.”

Having saddled his pony to his satisfaction, he took out a heavy dragoon pistol and looked at its priming with much care. This he placed in his belt, then swung himself into the saddle. And as Kit rode out from the line of the lodges, the sound of hoofs came to him. His quick eye turned in the direction of the sound; and he saw the Frenchman mounted on a powerful horse, a rifle in his hands, riding toward him.

CHAPTER XII

LOPEZ RIDES INTO CAMP

It is written boldly in the records of the great west that Kit Carson was a man without fear ; and never before did he show this fact as he did when he turned his horse's head and rode toward the Frenchman, Shunan. His pony went at a slow, swinging lope ; Kit sat him as quietly as though he were on his way to try a shot at a flock of prairie chickens, and there was no enemy on that side of the range.

And the bully was in no way backward. But his bluster was gone ; all the cunning in his nature was called upon to aid him in the crisis. His horse advanced at a swift pace ; and the heads of the two steeds almost touched when their riders drew rein.

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“Shunan,” said Kit, “am I the man you’re looking for?”

The eyes of the bully shifted under the steady gaze of the American.

“No,” said he.

Then almost instantly the muzzle of his rifle lifted and covered Kit. But quick as was his action, Kit’s was quicker. The dragoon pistol flashed, and its heavy bullet struck Shunan in the arm, shattering the bone; the man’s weapon exploded a second after the trapper’s; and its missile grazed Kit’s scalp; then it fell to the ground, and the man’s horse, unchecked, turned and dashed away.

Calmly Kit rode back to where he had left his friends.

“He meant to kill you,” stated old Zeke. “I saw the way he threw up his rifle barrel that nothing else would please him.”

And that the American trapper, lightning quick and of deadly aim, only shot to disable his foe was evident to all; had he so

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desired, Shunan would have dropped from his saddle never to rise again.

"Peace in camp is all we want," said Kit, quietly. "And I think as far as Shunan's concerned we'll have it in the future."

There was no expedition going that fall into the Blackfoot country; but one was organizing for a trading trip in that direction.

"We'll join that," said Kit.

"But," said Joe, "we'll be taking you away from work that will be profitable."

"This matter of the map has me on my mettle," said Kit. "I'm going to see it through now, no matter how long it takes."

They accordingly went out with the traders as far as the Big Snake River. Here they met a Hudson Bay trader named McCoy who had about abandoned his operations because of ill luck, and was about to take up a trapping venture. They joined him, thinking to get finally into the region

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they desired. But after a series of adventures, one of which saw them on the verge of starvation in a journey to Fort Hall, they were forced back to the Green River once more to await another season.

"It's the last try," said Dave, soberly. "If we don't get up into that country this time we'll have to give it up."

"That's what I promised dad in the letter I sent off to him yesterday," said Joe. "One more attempt; and if we fail, we go home."

As the fall grew near there was much talk of expeditions into the far regions; the near-by streams had been trapped so long that the beaver had become very scarce; and if success were desired the hunters must seek new waters.

And in the midst of this, Kit one evening came to the lodge which the boys had erected. There was a gleam in his eye which told them that something of a pleasing sort had happened.

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"Well," said he, "it looks at last as though we were going to have a chance. An expedition, one hundred strong, is to go as far as the Yellowstone."

"And do we go with them?" asked Dave, leaping up in his excitement.

"We do."

Both boys swung their caps in the air and leaped about in a series of acrobatic antics. But Kit sobered them in a moment.

"Not only do we go," said he, "but Shunan goes also."

"Ah!" said Dave; and he sat down in the door of the lodge.

"That means something, I should say," said Joe.

"All last season he was laid up with a maimed arm," said Kit; and now, as soon as he's able, he engages for the Blackfoot region. I know he's specially set on going there, because he refused a number of offers to go out with parties who are to head in other directions."

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Shunan was a very much changed man ; his manner was subdued, and he gave little or no trouble to the camp. Kit Carson he treated with much respect, and the boys he was careful not to molest. One day, however, shortly before the big expedition was to start, he met them in the camp street.

“ I hear you’re going up north,” said he.

“ Yes,” said Joe. “ We thought it might be a useful trip—and maybe profitable.”

Shunan looked at them with something like his old ferocity.

“ Take my advice and go somewhere else,” said he, slowly. “ It will be a dangerous journey for people looking for anything but beaver fur.”

He was about to pass on, but Dave Johnson placed himself in his path.

“ What do you mean by that ? ” said he.

“ Just what I say,” replied the man.

“ Nothing more and nothing less.”

Then he passed on, never giving them another glance ; and when the boys found

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themselves at their lodge that night with Kit Carson, they mentioned the matter. The trapper seemed pleased.

"I think," said he, "that that proves he's going to carry news to his friend, Moccasin Williams. Anyway, it shows that he expects to meet him, and doesn't want any one in the party who has a knowledge of his errand."

The chief trapper of the big expedition into the Blackfoot country was named Fontenelle; he was an experienced woodsman, and of a very determined character. With the packhorses loaded and the trappers mounted upon their mustangs, he addressed them.

"Every time we've gone into the region round about the head waters of the Missouri," said he, "we've been attacked, our horses have been stolen, our traps taken, our men killed; and in almost every case it has ended in our being driven out."

A murmur went up from the men. The

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Blackfeet were a hardy and warlike people who claimed a vast extent of country as their hunting ground. The tribe was at that time some thirty thousand strong and counted the finest of the many races of American Indians. As hunters they were unexcelled; their marksmanship was deadly; and as riders and horse breakers they were only led by the Comanches.

“This time they’ll not drive us back,” said old Zeke Matthews, who had engaged to go out with Fontenelle. He slapped the stock of his long rifle as he spoke. “It’s our turn now; and we’ll make the red thieves run.”

It is doubtful if any such band of trappers ever left the Green River before; they were hardy, seasoned mountaineers, inured to the wild life of the Rockies, expert in the craft of beaver taking, and accomplished in Indian warfare.

Straight on they pushed through the wilderness, day after day. In the country

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of the Crows they met with friendly greetings ; perhaps it was the unusual size of the party, and perhaps it was because it was headed for the hunting grounds of the Blackfeet—for years the deadly foes of the Crows. On the Yellowstone, which was in the heart of the Blackfoot region, they set about the serious business of taking fur. The company was divided—fifty men to attend the traps and fifty to guard the camp. The men lived with their rifles in their hands. As Zeke Matthews put it :

“The cook turns the meat on the spit with one hand and has a loaded pistol in the other.”

Fontenelle was constantly urging the men not to relax.

“We can hold our own with them,” said he. “But we must not let them surprise us. Keep your eyes peeled ; don’t overlook a sign.”

Kit Carson and his two boy friends needed no urging. And they not only

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watched for Blackfeet; they kept an eye upon the movements of Shunan as well. However, it was impossible to watch the man at all times; now and then he'd be out of their sight for hours at a time.

One night after supper Kit drew the boys aside. From beneath his hunting shirt he drew a small, pointed stick, notched here and there in a peculiar manner.

"What is it?" asked Dave.

"As we left the last line of traps this afternoon," said Kit, "I saw Shunan lag behind and then drop back among some trees. There were six of us; but I said nothing to the others. A little later, after Shunan rejoined us, I made believe I'd sighted a small buck and started off, away from the river. When I got out of sight, I changed my course, heading back toward the place where I'd seen Shunan disappear. Hunting around, I saw Indian signs in plenty; and then I saw this," holding up the wand, "sticking in the ground."

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"A message!" said both boys in a breath.

Kit nodded.

"Yes; and I'll venture there was one waiting for him from Williams or the redskins."

After this they kept a stricter watch than ever upon the Frenchman; but he seemed to be entirely interested in the work of trapping and curing furs, and not once did they detect him in any further communication with the savages.

"They've come to some kind of an understanding," said Kit, after a time. "And he's waiting for a certain time to come around. Like as not it's the spring; for it's too late to jump out now and try to get back to Sante Fé. Winter'd overtake them."

Winter came on at last, the streams were frozen and the trappers gave up their labors. They left the Blackfoot country determining to winter in a more friendly section. A band of Crows guided them to a shel-

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tered valley, and the two parties camped side by side during the severe months.

The Crows were mostly young warriors, and splendidly athletic; in good weather they arrayed themselves against the white men in games of strength and skill; hunting was the favorite test, but horsemanship, running and leaping, were also well liked. In these contests the boys grew very intimate with a stalwart young brave whose name was Tall Thunder.

One night they sat beside him at a lodge fire in the Crow camp; a number of the young warriors were also present, but they rarely spoke, knowing little of the white man's language. Tall Thunder, however, could make himself understood without much difficulty. He related many of his hunting exploits, and some of the deeds of his tribe in their wars with the Blackfeet.

"Your English is good," praised Joe.
"How did you learn it?"

"Um—much teach!" explained Tall

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Thunder. "Half-breed speak much Englees. Him Spotted Snake."

The boys looked at each other. Here was verification of the story of old Diaz, the trader at Santa Fé, and of the news gathered by Shunan. Lopez, or Spotted Snake, was, or had been, in the northern wilderness.

"Do you know where Spotted Snake is now?" asked Dave.

"Um! Crow village—four suns. Live like chief!"

The boys understood from this that Lopez was then in a Crow village four days' journey from where they were; and also that he was much honored. They were discussing this fact in some excitement, when the young Crow, who could make nothing of the rapid English, said:

"Spotted Snake is your friend?"

Dave Johnson shook his head. Tall Thunder seemed to turn the denial over for a space; then he said:

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“Um! Spotted Snake keep away from white men. Only want to see one.” He nodded his head. “Him with Blackfeet. Much hate.”

“He hates the white man who lives among the Blackfeet?”

Tall Thunder nodded once more.

“Much hate!” he repeated. Then as though to show the extent of the man’s hatred: “Want Crow to go on war-path. Against Blackfeet. Chiefs and old men hold council. Say no.”

Later in the evening the boys spoke to Kit about this. He was interested.

“Lopez has his enemy placed,” said he. “And maybe, through the news brought by Shunan, Williams knows something about the whereabouts of Lopez.” Then, after a moment, during which he stared into the fire: “It seems to me, boys, that your long hunt is going to come to something at last. Unless an accident happens Williams will get out of this region in the spring; Shunan

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will go with him. Watch Shunan; don't let him make a move that we don't see, and we can overreach them."

It was a hard winter on the horses; soft branches and bark, the inside layer of the cottonwood, was the only fodder the poor animals had for weeks; but the fresh green of the spring soon began to put them in condition when that anxiously looked for season arrived.

While waiting for the horses to pick up some flesh, Fontenelle, the chief trapper, sent two men to Fort Laramie for some much needed supplies. The news came later that they had been ambushed and killed by Blackfeet.

It was in no very soft mood that the trappers set out for their hunting grounds; but, though they did not know it, the time for the striking of a retaliatory blow was at hand.

As they drew near to the source of the Missouri, they one evening camped on the

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fork of a small tributary. The setting sun was slanting across the stream, the campfires were lighted and the trappers were cooking their supper, standing guard or caring for the horses. Suddenly a shout came from one of the pickets, together with the sound of hoof beats. In a few moments a couple of fur hunters came into camp with a horseman. In spite of the Indian trappings worn by both mustang and rider, both Dave Johnson and Joe Frazier recognized him at a glance.

“Lopez!” they exclaimed in a breath; and then the trappers closed in around the half-breed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VILLAGE OF THE BLACKFEET

THE throng of buckskin-clad trappers crowded about the half-breed Lopez ; every eye was on him ; all were curious to hear the nature of his errand.

“I came to warn you,” he said in Spanish, to Fontenelle. “Directly in your path, one day’s ride from here, is the main village of the Blackfeet. Hold to your present course and you’ll have them swarming around you like bees.”

For a moment there was a dead silence. Then the many grievances they held against that particular tribe, and more especially the fate of the two messengers to Fort Laramie, came to the minds of the trappers. As one man they gripped their rifles and there arose a cry for vengeance. The

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half-breed sat his mustang quietly; he said nothing, but in his eye was a satisfied gleam. Kit Carson touched Dave Johnson's sleeve.

"Moccasin Williams is in that village. That is why the half-breed is here. Failing to get the Crows to attack them, he now tries our men."

"And with what result, do you think?" asked Dave.

For answer Kit pointed to the trapper band; to a man, almost, they were gathered about Fontenelle; their voices were lifted in a harsh hubbub; their rifles were waved about; they clamored for war.

It was a wild scene, and one neither of the boys ever forgot; the rough, bearded men, buckskin clad, their weapons gleaming in the flare of the camp-fires, while all around was silence and the darkness of the wilderness.

When the clamor died down, the chief trapper spoke.

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"We have suffered at the hands of the Blackfeet," said he. "And now that a chance has come to strike a blow, we will not let it pass."

There was a wild hurrah, and the men scattered about the camp, gathering at the various fires, cleaning their rifles, oiling the locks of their pistols, seeing to the edge of knife and hatchet.

"And see that there's plenty of good black powder in your horns," advised old Zeke. "Bullets and flints will be things you can't have too much of either; for unless I'm much mistaken we've got a day of days ahead of us to-morrow, lads."

As the half-breed slipped from his horse and approached a fire at which Kit and the boys stood alone he nodded as though not at all surprised to see them.

"I saw all three of you a dozen times during the winter," said he. "But you did not see me. I often rode through the passes when the snow melted, and looked

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down at your camp in the valley from the hills."

"And it was then, I guess, that you thought how well it would fit in with your plans if you could get our party to attack the Blackfeet."

The half-breed smiled the disagreeable smile natural to him.

"But," said he, "I never hoped to have it happen, until the two riders going to Laramie were killed. After that," and he snapped his fingers, "I knew it would be nothing."

"If you were so anxious to revenge yourself on Williams, why have you waited so long?" asked Kit. "A man who really wanted satisfaction would have tried for it single-handed."

"Do you think I have not?" asked Lopez, quietly. "Do you suppose I have been lying by all this time waiting to be helped? I spent months in trying to find out where he was. Twice I was taken by

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the Blackfeet and once almost lost my life. That I could speak their language and claimed to be related to their tribe was all that saved me. At last I located him in the village which you will see to-morrow. The Pueblos call me Spotted Snake," and he laughed, harshly. "Well, I tried to earn the name in my lookout for Moccasin Williams; for never a snake held so close to the ground, or crawled so silently through the grass as I did. But I never got him as I wanted him. A hundred times I had him under my rifle, but he was never near enough for me to be sure. To-morrow," and there was a deadly meaning in his voice, "I will try again; and I think I shall succeed."

The fire at which they stood was one removed from the others, having been kindled by a horse guard to roast a particularly prized piece of buffalo tongue while he was on watch. The trees threw huge, dancing shadows all about; and their own move-

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ments were grotesquely mimicked by the giant shades flung from them by the changing light. There was a silence after the half-breed's last words; then, as he stood staring into the red of the blaze, Dave Johnson fancied he heard a sound behind him. Trained, by this time, to respond to sounds which he did not understand, Dave was about to turn; but he felt the grip of Kit upon his arm—a grip which asked for silence as plainly as words could have done.

Kit, facing the half-breed, spoke quietly:

“The map which belongs to these boys, now? What about that?”

The half-breed gave a gesture of contempt.

“If I can find the man who stole it from me, that's all I ask,” said he.

“Well, all right,” said Kit. Then he added, drily, “But seeing that you stole it yourself, Spotted Snake, I think you're making a mighty big complaint.”

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"He claimed to be my friend. He is a traitor," said the half-breed, sullenly.

"As I have said, all right," repeated Kit. "You can look at the thing just as you see fit, and I'll not say a word against it. But," and here there was a ring in his voice like that of steel, "the map belongs to these two lads, and I'm going to see that they get it. It belongs to them and no one else shall have it; neither you, Lopez, who stand there grinning at me; nor you, Moccasin Williams, away there in the Blackfoot town; nor you, Shunan, who are behind me in the bushes!" He wheeled as he spoke these last words, and faced the darkness. "Come out," said he. "We know you're there, and we know why you're there."

There came a swishing and clattering among the thick growth, and the burly Frenchman made his appearance.

"I was looking for fuel," he growled, sullenly. "I didn't know you were here."

Kit regarded him steadily.

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“I never told the rest of the men how you were in communication with the Blackfeet in the fall,” said he. Then as the man tried to interrupt, he lifted a hand for silence. “If I had,” he went on, “I guess you know what would have happened—for they don’t love that people. But,” and the ring in his voice was as hard as before and the menace was as clear, “if you make an attempt to leave camp to give warning they will be told now. So, if you value a whole skin, you’ll sit tight and say nothing.”

“I never meant to ——” began the bully, but Kit stopped him.

“It makes no difference what you meant,” he said. “The thing is there, just the same. I’ll give Fontenelle a hint, and there will be a quiet guard over you until our little business with the redskins is done. So mind what movements you make when away from the camp. You’ll not know which one’ll draw the bullet from some pistol.”

And that there was something behind

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this warning was soon made plain to the bully ; as he sat by the fire, as he rolled in his blanket, he felt the watch held over him ; not once during the long night did it relax ; and though he desired ever so much to warn his confederate among the Indians, he did not dare to make a move.

Long before dawn the camp was astir, breakfast was cooked and eaten, and the entire party of one hundred trappers, under the guidance of Lopez, started in the direction of the Blackfoot village. After a march of some six hours they struck a broad and well-defined trail.

"This leads straight to the village," said Lopez. "Two or three hours more and we are there."

But at this point Fontenelle halted the column of trappers.

"I think it would be best," said he, "if a small party went ahead and reconnoitered. In marching on blindly this way there is always danger of a trap."

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Lopez protested loudly ; but the trappers as a body thought well of the suggestion.

“ Carson,” said the head trapper to Kit, “ take five men and go have a look at the trail and the village. We’ll camp here until you return.”

Accordingly, with Zeke Matthews, the two boys and a pair of seasoned woodsmen, Kit started off. Silently they rode along the narrow Indian trail, being careful to make a note of every spot that would afford a chance for an ambushade ; at length they drew near the village, a perfect city of lodges ; creeping among the rocks and trees they managed to get a close view of what was going on.

From the opposite side of the town a great drove of horses was being driven in ; camp equipment was being brought together as though for a move.

“ We’re none too soon,” said Kit in a whisper, to Dave. “ By this time tomorrow they’d be gone.”

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“Look!” said Joe, in a low voice, his rifle barrel indicating a place near to the end of a row of lodges. “A white man!”

“Moccasin Williams,” were Kit’s words, as his eyes rested upon the renegade. “Well, Spotted Snake was right, wasn’t he?”

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST BATTLE

MAKING sure that the savages were merely in the first stages of their preparations for departure, Kit and his little party of scouts crept away through the trees and grass to the place where they had left their horses. Mounting, they gained the trappers' camp just after night-fall.

When the news was broken, the woodsmen gathered about their fires in council. After some discussion a plan was agreed upon.

"Kit will take half of you," said the chief trapper, "and ride to the attack. The other half will stay behind with me to guard the pack animals and the furs."

"But don't stand still," was Kit Carson's advice. "Advance slowly in our track.

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Then you'll be a kind of reserve in case we need you."

Everything agreed upon, the trappers rolled themselves in their robes and blankets around the fires; and at dawn next day they divided according to their plan; Kit and his fifty taking the Indian trail at a swinging pace, every man in the advance eager for the fight.

"After to-day," prophesied Zeke Matthews, "those varmints of Blackfeet won't be so quick with their monkey shines. They'll get a lesson they'll remember for some time to come."

They approached the Indian town without being discovered; the savages were in the heart of their own country, never dreaming of attack, and therefore had out no sentinels. The trappers, each well mounted, rifle in hand and side arms ready to be grasped at a second's notice, drew up in a line.

"Now, men," said Kit, his eyes running

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over them, to make sure that all were prepared. "At full speed! Charge!"

Like a thunderbolt the woodsmen struck the Blackfoot village; a volley from the long rifles swept among the warriors and a dozen of them pitched headlong. A shrill yell arose; the savages gripped their weapons and fell back from their town, fighting every step of the way.

The Blackfoot was a fighting man of craft, courage and generalship. Unlike the Crows and more southern tribes, he did not go mad with excitement when he faced the superior weapons of the white man. On the contrary he always fought them according to a carefully laid out plan.

From behind rocks and stumps and fallen trees the long arrows began to wing their deadly way; taking the cue the trappers protected themselves in much the same fashion, and their rifles continued to speed bullets wherever a tufted head showed itself.

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For fully three hours this sort of warfare continued ; the Blackfeet fought with courage and judgment ; craftily they drew the fire of the trappers until the supply of ammunition began to grow low.

As this latter grew apparent to Kit he passed the word to slacken the fire.

“ Don’t press a trigger unless you are sure of a redskin,” was his command.

And as the rifle fire slackened the Indians grew more bold. They understood what had happened, and crept forward from tree to tree, from rock to rock, meaning to get near enough for a grand rush and then to engage the whites hand to hand.

“ I notice,” said Dave Johnson, as he lay at full length behind a stump, his rifle advanced, his eyes on the dark-skinned enemy, “ that there’s a bullet comes now and then from over there to the right. One of the braves must have a rifle.”

“ It’s Moccasin Williams,” replied Kit Carson, from behind a near-by tree. “ He’s

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behind that big cottonwood at the mouth of the ravine, trying some sharpshooting."

"I'd like to get a ——" but Dave never finished the sentence, for Kit's rifle cracked and the bark flew from the big cottonwood in a shower, leaving a deep seam to show the track of the bullet.

"Missed!" said Kit, coolly. "But better luck next time."

In a little while the Indians pressed forward under cover; then, thinking themselves near enough for a rush, they leaped from behind the trees and with shrill yells and brandished hatchets and knives, darted at the trappers.

The long rifles greeted them once more; but as they still came on, the pistols were discharged in their very faces with terrible effect. This was more than savage fortitude could bear up under, and they sought cover once more with howls of rage and a fresh flight of arrows.

Then closer and closer they drew and

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slower and slower grew the fire of the whites. There were but few charges of powder left. Another rush of the savages, and there would be no more.

"It looks bad," said old Zeke, as he drained his powder-horn of its last grain. "But we'll give a good account of ourselves for all."

But a last desperate struggle with knife and clubbed rifle was not to come, for as the powder was quite exhausted, word was brought to Kit that the reserve of trappers under Fontenelle had arrived. And soon after, each horn was refilled, each rifle recharged, and with the confidence of increased numbers the trappers advanced, firing as they went.

In the van of the whites was the half-breed, Lopez; he held his rifle ready, but seemed to reserve his fire. Kit Carson, firing and loading and firing and loading, noticed this.

"Anything wrong with your shooting iron, Spotted Snake?" asked the trapper.

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"No," replied the half-breed, never taking his eyes from the flitting line of savages as they moved from cover to cover. "But the bullet that's in it is meant for Moccasin Williams, and him only."

Steadily the trappers pressed forward; quicker and quicker grew the flitting of the savages from rock to tree and from tree to stump; and at length the crafty retreat began to weaken, then to waver. There was less purpose in it; finally the braves at one side broke and ran; then the entire line followed suit.

Now for the first time since he entered the action, the rifle of Lopez lifted. The boys saw an ungainly white man in the rush of the fleeing savages; he had sandy hair and a thin, fox-like face. A dozen steps he took, the fox-face turned over his shoulder to observe the pursuers, then Lopez' piece crashed and the man pitched forward to the ground.

With a shrill, throaty cry of exultation,

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Lopez darted forward; the boys saw him reach the prostrate form, a knife in his hand. But as he bent over it the form showed unexpected life. Moccasin Williams sprang to his feet, drawing an Indian hatchet from his belt as he did so, and both men struck at each other. Both blows took effect; then their arms encircled each other, there was a frenzied clutching at each other's throats, and they fell to the earth.

And when Kit Carson returned from the pursuit of the Indians, which was but a short one, he found the boys standing above the two dead bodies.

"Your property?" he asked, his swift eyes telling him what had occurred.

"Here," said Joe, and he held up a folded paper.

"Good!" said the trapper. "Take care of it, for you've had a hard fight to get it back; and the next time you might not be so lucky."

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The blow dealt the Blackfeet that day was a heavy one; and they remembered it, as Zeke Matthews had prophesied, for a long time after.

Great good luck followed the Fontenelle band in their labors after this; and when they finally journeyed to the trading camp, held that year on Mud River, they took with them a great wealth of furs.

And it was on Mud River, some weeks later, that Kit Carson parted with the boys, who proposed to join an ingoing party as far as Santa Fé, and then take ship at one of the Gulf ports for New York.

"Good-bye, lads," he said, as he pressed their hands. "Some day I may go east, and if I ever do, I'll be sure to look you up."

"East!" exclaimed Joe. "West, you mean, Kit. In a year we'll be in California again, digging and washing along that wonderful river which, as old Goat Beard said, runs with gold."

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And Joe was right as to place. But he was wrong about the time.

The next time the three met it was in California; but fifteen years or more had passed. The boys had become bronzed men and were accounted the richest in the New Eldorado. And Kit Carson was then the most famous man in the great west; his fame as an Indian fighter and pathfinder had gone around the globe.

"You found your river of gold then," said he, as they gripped hands once more.

"Yes," laughed Dave. "It proved to be the Sacramento."

"But we had to wait until the United States took California over, after the war with Mexico," said Joe, rather ruefully. "It was a long time, but," and his eyes laughed much as they used to do, "it was worth the waiting."

"I should think so, indeed," said the trapper.

CHAPTER XV

SKETCH OF CARSON'S LIFE

CHRISTOPHER or "Kit" Carson was born in Madison County, Kentucky, in December, 1809. The great state had been opened only a few years and was, in many parts, still a trackless wilderness.

Kit was reared in the log house of the frontier; and like most noted frontiersmen grew accustomed to the rifle at an early age.

But however primitive Kentucky may have been there were apparently too many settlers to please the elder Carson; for a year after the birth of Kit, he packed his effects upon the backs of his horses, and with his family took up the trail for the more distant west. They crossed the Mississippi and settled in that vast country later ceded by Napoleon to the United States, and then known as Upper Louisiana.

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Here Kit grew up among the wild spirits of the border, accustomed to the idea of danger and renowned even in his boyhood as a rifle shot, a hunter and the possessor of invincible resolution. He served two years as apprentice to a saddler; then the stories of the Sante Fé trail, the dangers and wonders thereof, appealed to him so strongly that he joined a party about to start over it.

This was the day when vast herds of buffalo roamed the great plains, when the Rocky Mountains were almost a thing of fable. And at the age of eighteen we find Kit Carson in the Mexican city of Santa Fé, with the whirl of the wonderful southwest all about him. The fur trade was approaching its height and the commerce of the prairies had centered about the town. To it came all the wonderful characters of the border, and from it started more expeditions than from any other city in the west.

Young Carson fell in love with the wild country; with rifle, hatchet and knife, he

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penetrated the hills to the north and there fell in with Kin Cade, an old mountaineer who taught him much of the lore of the West which afterward proved so useful to him. Later, Kit joined the train of a trader going back to Missouri. The Santa Fé trail was a thousand miles long, and through a savage region of wolves and Indians, and waterless deserts. But Kit did not mind this; he liked the toil of it and the danger. But, half-way over the trail, the thought came to him that he was going back "East." At a ford on the Arkansas River they encountered another band of traders on their way to the west; Kit joined them and returned to Santa Fé. Reaching the fur market once more, Young Carson engaged with a Colonel Trammel, who was leading a trading expedition southward to the rich mines of Chihuahua. Having learned Spanish from Kin Cade, he was now to serve as interpreter.

Returning from this venture he went to

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Taos, a trapper's town about a hundred and fifty miles north of Santa Fé. Here he met the trapper, Ewing Young, for the first time, and was engaged as a camp cook. But Young was not long in seeing the qualities of his youthful recruit, and when he took up his march for California, where we find his party in the first chapter of "In the Rockies with Kit Carson," Kit was a full fledged trapper.

After the great battle with the Blackfeet, as related in the last chapter of the story, Kit Carson joined a body of trappers at the summer rendezvous. Later he joined a trading party going into the country of the Navajos, a highly intelligent tribe who cultivated the arts and were quite rich. After a profitable venture among these people he became the hunter, or meat provider for the fort on the Platte River.

But he preferred trapping, it would seem ; and after some smaller ventures joined a large party and once more ventured into

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the Blackfoot country. In the winter traces of Indians were seen near their camp; knowing that the savages must be in large force to venture so near to them, Kit Carson proposed that the whites strike the first blow, and so plant terror in the hearts of the Blackfeet.

Forty trappers took the trail; Kit was given the command. A band of savages were encountered and attacked. They fled, falling back upon a still larger band. A desperate battle followed, fought from behind trees and rocks, and as night fell, the Blackfeet, with many of their braves dead or disabled, retired across a frozen stream to an island in its middle, where they had erected a log fort. Under the cover of the darkness, however, the Indians left even this and hurried away.

Returning to camp a council was held. The trappers were sure the savages would return in great numbers, and they began to prepare for them. Intrenchments were

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prepared ; trees, brush, stumps, fallen logs and boulders were cleared away from the camp upon every side. If the savages advanced, they must do so in the open.

At daybreak one morning the Indians came, a thousand or more in number, and advanced to crush the whites for good and all. But at the verge of the cleared space they halted, astonished. They could not advance without exposing themselves to the deadly fire of the long rifles ; to take the fort meant an awful sacrifice. A council was held in which there was much speech-making. Then the host broke into two bands and moved away over the mountains ; and after this that particular body of trappers were troubled no more.

But Kit was destined to have many encounters with the Blackfeet and other hostile tribes ; and at the same time there were numerous others with whom he became quite friendly ; indeed, many was the village into which he could ride and be greeted

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as a brother. In spite of all the opposition of the Indians of the mountains, the trappers persisted. But at length the price of furs fell to such a degree that hunting them grew unprofitable. And so Kit abandoned the pursuit and began a career as a hunter, during which he pushed his acquaintance with the nations of the Cheyennes, the Kiowas, the Arapahoes and the Comanches. Once he was instrumental in preventing a deadly war between the powerful Sioux people and the Comanche. The Sioux had intruded upon the hunting ground of the other tribe; this was resented; fights followed; the Comanches were beaten. Kit Carson was the friend of both peoples; he went to their chiefs; he parleyed and argued. The result was that the Sioux left the Comanche hunting ground, their chiefs giving their word that they'd never return.

Among the Comanches, Kit Carson found a wife—a beautiful Indian girl with a mind much superior to that of the women of her

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race. They had a daughter. Afterward the wife and mother died of a plague which had broken out; and when the child grew a little older, Kit took her to St. Louis to be educated and brought up amidst civilized surroundings.

Bound up the Missouri River from St. Louis, Kit fell in with Lieutenant John C. Frémont, of the Topographical Engineers Corps. This officer had been sent by the War Department to explore on the line of the Kansas and Great Platte Rivers, and between the South Pass in the Rockies and the frontier of Missouri. Frémont had a party of twenty-one boatmen who knew the western life; he had also engaged a guide, but this latter man had failed him. Learning this, Kit Carson offered his services as one who knew the mountains and streams, having trapped among them for sixteen years. He was accepted; and thus began that series of explorations that made the name of Frémont, the pathfinder, known

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the country over, and that of Kit Carson, frontiersman, famous throughout the world.

Three separate expeditions into the wilds were required before Frémont completed his work, and in each of these Kit Carson acted as his guide. They were expeditions crowded with Indian battles, with perils and escapes by flood and field.

After years of adventure, Kit began to farm and raise sheep, organizing a hunting party of his old friends now and then ; later the government, because of his knowledge of the tribes, made him an Indian agent.

This difficult post he filled as probably it had never been filled before. During the rebellion he was of much service to the government on the border ; and at the close of the war was breveted a brigadier general of volunteers. He died at Fort Lyon, Colorado, in May, 1868, in the sixtieth year of his age.

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